JOHN COLTER

DISCOVERER OF YELLOWSTONE PARK

Colter pursued by the Indians.

THE FAMOUS ESCAPE FROM THE BLACKFEET

From *Indian Anecdotes and Barbarities*, printed in Palmer, Massachusetts, about 1830. In the Collection of W. R. Coe, Esq.

JOHN COLTER

DISCOVERER OF YELLOWSTONE PARK

AN ACCOUNT OF

HIS EXPLORATION IN 1807

AND OF

HIS FURTHER ADVENTURES

AS

HUNTER; TRAPPER; INDIAN FIGHTER; PATHFINDER
AND MEMBER OF THE LEWIS AND
CLARK EXPEDITION

WITH A MAP

By STALLO VINTON, A.M., LLB.

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This edition consists of
Five hundred and thirty copies,
of which thirty are on large paper

To him who first beheld the marvels of the Yellowstone and first told them to the world; to him whose message fell on disbelieving and unheeding ears; to the memory of John Colter; this book is dedicated.

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN Colter's active life in the Far West spanned less than seven years, from 1803 to 1810. In that space of time, during which he never beheld the habitations of civilized man, he discovered Yellowstone Lake and the wonders of the surrounding region; made other solitary journeys into the unknown Wilderness for hundreds of miles; was the first American to set foot in what is now Wyoming; discovered several passes through the Rocky Mountains; was a member of the first American exploring expedition to reach the Pacific Coast; was hunter, trapper, and guide; and braved every extreme of hunger, privation and danger from the Indians, until his risk of life became a commonplace.

Yet despite all those achievements, and even to the few who have heard of him, he has become a dim and shadowy figure, almost legendary. And notwithstanding the knowledge now available there still remains about this Ulysses of the Rockies an aura of mystery. His strange career suggests that he was driven by some overmastering power, some irresistible daemon of adventure. More than once he decided to go back to civilization, but each time, until his final return, some motive impelled him to remain in the Wilderness.

Providence held him to his task until his destiny was fulfilled.

Among the Western trappers of later decades he became a myth, and his name was perpetuated by the derisive phrase of "Colter's Hell," a designation which came significantly to express scant measure of belief in his Odyssey.

Colter's principal place in history is due to the fact that he was the first white man to penetrate the region of Yellowstone Lake. This he did in his solitary journey of 1807, during which he explored many hundreds of miles of country wholly unknown. On this expedition he travelled along the Big Horn; up the Shoshone; over the Continental Divide to the headwaters of the Snake at Jackson Lake; north across the Divide again to the sources of the Yellowstone River at Yellowstone Lake; along the Canyon of the Yellowstone; and thence back eastwardly to his starting point.

We do not know precisely how much he saw on that long and lonely quest. The only records of it are the mute testimony of Clark's map, and the tradition handed down among the trappers. On his return to St. Louis he described his journey to William Clark, who outlined the route on the map which appears in the Biddle edition of the History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This map shows the Lake, the course of the River, the Canyon, a fossil deposit, one hot spring near by, and a boiling spring much farther away on the

Stinkingwater. What else Colter reported to Clark we may only conjecture. That he saw certain of the remarkable volcanic manifestations, and told of them, is proved by the existence of the legend of "Colter's Hell."

Colter probably was not believed by some, despite his previous record of trustworthiness. Nor was his experience a solitary one with respect to the unique country into which he had penetrated. Indeed for sixty years thereafter the region continued to be "discovered," and during that period each new explorer in turn was ridiculed as a monumental liar. Colter died before he became a laughing stock. James Bridger, who later told a similar story, had for many years a dubious reputation for veracity largely because he ventured to speak the truth. Descriptions of the geysers and other strange phenomena appeared in print in 1827, and again in 1842, but were ignored. Even as late as 1870 parties that explored the region were doubted when they reported what they had seen.

The Indians had told Clark there was a place where the earth trembled and frequent noises like thunder were heard; a place where their children could not sleep; a region possessed of spirits; averse to the approach of man.[1] Clark supposed this mysterious region to be on the Tongue River, but it can hardly be doubted that the Indians re-

[1] *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* R. G. Thwaites, Editor, N. Y., 1904-05, VI, p. 267.

ferred to the geyser basin in the Park. The locality was avoided by the natives, and this helped to keep the whites in ignorance of its character. It is significant that the two Indians with the explorers of 1869 showed utmost terror in the presence of the geysers.

After Colter's time the trappers established rendezvous and camps in Jackson and Pierre's Holes and on the Three Forks of the Missouri; and not far away were Fort Hall on the Snake River, and Fort Bonneville on the Green. Fur hunters undoubtedly went into the Yellowstone country, besides the known visits of Bridger, Meek and Osborne Russell. So within a few years after Colter's death the region was almost ringed with activities, and it is strange that the very awe implanted in the minds of the savages, and the repeated rumors and tales current among the trappers did not, many years sooner, inspire some venturesome and inquisitive soul to further investigation and authentic report.

There are, however, partial explanations for the continued ignorance of the public regarding the region. The trappers and traders, for the most part, were not literate men and were interested only in their occupation. The fur trade in those localities had almost died out by the forties, and the emigration to the Pacific which then began sought the easiest route, which was considerably south of the area under consideration. And for more than a generation afterward all

travel through the Rockies kept to the well beaten paths. The discovery of the precious metals, and the Civil War, further served to divert men's minds from the exploration of the Rockies. Yet with all these allowances it is still hard to understand why the Yellowstone region could have remained so long unknown to the world.

It is difficult for us to realize how little exact information concerning the immense western expanses was possessed by our ancestors of a century ago. The vaguest ideas prevailed, and a mass of misinformation was in general circulation. As late as 1828 the *Missionary Herald* asserted that it was a question whether there were any harbors between the mouth of the Columbia and San Francisco;[2] and the contempt for the worthless West expressed many years later by such men as Daniel Webster has become a byword. The mythical "Great American Desert" persisted in our geographies to our own school days.[3]

Still another circumstance contributed to popular ignorance on the subject. The discoveries of the travellers of those times were almost never promptly added to the authoritative body of information available to the public. Years often went by before such accounts were published. Many of the most informative records never

[2] *Missionary Herald,* Boston, Aug., 1828.

[3] For a description of the vast uninhabitable waste this was supposed to be, see Irving, *Astoria,* Philadelphia, 1836, I, p. 230.

came before contemporaries in any form; and indeed have only recently been found. In some cases, too, jealousy between rival groups of trappers caused them to attempt concealment of their geographical knowledge.

Colter was the first man to point out the possibility of crossing the Rocky Mountains with wagons; an announcement which shows his keen powers of perception. Brackenridge, also an alert observer, sensed the importance of this great discovery and gave it its first printed publicity in 1811. Yet it was not until 1836 that Marcus Whitman penetrated as far as Fort Boise with a wagon; and four years later that Newell and Meek drove wagons to the Columbia.

The term "pioneers" has generally been applied to those hardy and venturesome emigrants who first braved the western trails for the purpose of permanent settlement on the Pacific Coast. In 1839 a first thin trickle of the sort went through the Rockies to Oregon, but these did not travel over unknown routes. Lewis and Clark had blazed a way. From their time on a steadily increasing number of trappers and traders, with Missouri as a base, extended their operations over all the headwaters of the Missouri River on the eastern watershed of the Rockies; over the Continental Divide to the easterly reaches of the Snake River, and southward to the Green River, a tributary of the Colorado.

The earliest knowledge of most of this coun-

try, as a consequence, came from fur hunters who followed the beaver further and further up more distant streams as it was progressively exterminated under intensive trapping. Meantime a body of knowledge concerning routes and conditions grew up and was embodied in published accounts, and so made available for the coming migration. The trappers were therefore the true pathfinders, pioneers, and van-guard of civilization; and of that class Colter was among the earliest and most important.

We have no sustained picture of him. He is revealed to us only as the face of nature is illuminated for an instant by lightning flashes, but it is significant of the mold of the man that each such moment shows the same heroic figure.

Colter was famous for his courage. Brackenridge, Bradbury and James all refer to it in glowing terms; and he must indeed have possessed this supreme virtue of the frontiersman in an outstanding degree to be singled out by them among men with whom bravery was a commonplace. Washington Irving, too, caught the enthusiasm he inspired in those who knew him, and embodied in his *Astoria* one of Colter's picturesque adventures as worthy of a place with the stirring deeds of the Argonauts of the ill-fated post on the Columbia. Colter's quickness of mind and instantaneous reaction to desperate emergency are illustrated again and again in his experiences, and on more than one occasion saved his life.

Yet he was no reckless daredevil. Though disdainful of danger he was always careful to avoid unnecessary risks. A careless man might by good luck return from one expedition such as Colter made into the Wilderness, but he could not reasonably hope to survive a second one. When, by 1810, the then infuriated Blackfeet had resolved upon a war of extermination against the whites, Colter, lion-hearted though he was, was the first to recognize that a small body of trappers far from their base could not maintain themselves against such odds. So he left the region. His judgment was soon vindicated, for after heavy losses the remnant of the party was driven out.

Colter, in his physical attributes also, was well fitted for the Wilderness. Above the common height; powerful of frame; physically quick, alert, enduring; a fine shot; he was the ideal frontiersman. Patient and loyal he must likewise have been, for the scores of references to him in the Lewis and Clark *Journals* show he performed his duties faithfully and well. Not a hint of an act of meanness, selfishness or bad temper is there recorded against him.

Colter was the type whose whole mode and philosophy of life are a defiance of civilization, yet whose deeds contribute so much to human progress. His type is that of the true adventurer who seeks danger for its own sake; disdains ease and comfort; and finds his greatest joy in meeting and overcoming difficulties of every sort.

Many men in the pursuit of wealth or glory or in the path of duty willingly undergo severe hardships and great dangers because such experiences are merely obstacles to be surmounted on the road to a success that lies beyond. But men like Colter seek no prize of gold or honor. The daily battle of wits for the maintenance of life itself is essential for the thrill they crave to make life interesting.

Colter's three years' service with Lewis and Clark undoubtedly developed and fixed his character. He was at first a private in the Expedition and amenable to the military discipline that was rigorously enforced, and therefore had little opportunity to distinguish himself. Yet his qualitiese were so quickly recognized that he was given the rank and privileges of a hunter, and his commanders later testified to his valuable services when they gave to him alone the special favor of a discharge before the completion of the Expedition.

In August of 1806, Colter left Lewis and Clark, and after a winter spent in trapping on the upper Missouri and lower Yellowstone he joined the trading and trapping party of Manuel Lisa, the first organization of the sort to invade the new and rich beaver country reported by the great explorers. A post was established at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Big Horn, and the shrewd Spaniard found Colter a valuable associate, since he alone was familiar with the

country and the habits and language of the Indians. It was during this relationship with Lisa, and while Colter was on an embassy to the native tribes, that he made his memorable Yellowstone discoveries.

Not long after this journey the Blackfeet took the warpath and attacked the trappers at every opportunity, and from that time on Colter had numerous desperate encounters with them. That in which his companion Potts was killed and he himself escaped has become a classic through its telling by Bradbury and Washington Irving, and its inclusion in collections of tales of the frontier.

And so this man had for many years a reputation merely as a brave and resourceful Indian fighter and hero of thrilling escapes. Concerning his far more important acts there remained only a legend — dimming as his old companions were killed or abandoned their traps — of a fabulous journey to an incredible inferno.

Of recent years, however, the importance of his discoveries has been recognized. An effort has here been made to gather all the pertinent facts available, and to set forth, as adequately as may be, his achievements. John Colter was one of those inarticulate heroes whose deeds alone must speak for him. Not in any diary or narrative by his hand, but in the history and geography of his country, is his record embedded.

CHAPTER I

WITH LEWIS AND CLARK

JOHN Colter first definitely emerged from the unknown when he joined the Lewis and Clark Expedition at Maysville, Kentucky, in 1803. According to tradition he had gone to Kentucky from Virginia, but until now nothing else has been found concerning his antecedents. The research preliminary to this work has, however, resulted in the location of members of his family, and has made possible the presentation of the following facts.[1]

Colter was born between 1775 and 1780. Thomas James, who knew him in 1810, then considered him to be about thirty-five years of age, which indicates the earlier date.[2]

He was of the fourth generation from the founder of the family in America, Micajah Coalter,[3] a pioneer of Scottish ancestry who came to

[1] For the particulars of Colter's ancestry and family the author is indebted to Mrs. Janet M. Logan, of Lincoln, Nebraska, and to Mrs. Lucy Rodes Irvine, of Staunton, Virginia, both descendants of Michael Coalter.

[2] James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans,* Ed. W. S. Douglas, St. Louis, 1916, p. 57.

[3] The spelling of Colter has been adopted as having the sanction of long and generally accepted usage, although the correct spelling is doubtful. Coalter is the form used by his family, though their records show that the variants Colter and Coulter were used. The

Virginia from the north of Ireland about the year 1700. The father of the subject of this memoir bore the same name, John, and was the son of Michael, the first born of Micajah. The John Colter of these pages journeyed into the interior while still a young man, and never returned, and as a consequence the family records of him are but scanty. His people, however, proudly handed down the knowledge that he had been a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Of his later career they apparently had no contemporary information.

It has not been positively established that he was born in Virginia, but the still existing family tradition to that effect is supported by the fact that, so far as is known, all the members of his family had continued to live in Virginia down to his own generation. At that period some of the Coalters emigrated to the West and ultimately located in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Kentucky. Descendants of Micajah Coalter are still living at Staunton, Virginia. The family from ancient times had various holdings of land in the district known as "Stuart's Draft," near Staunton, as appears from deeds on record. The story of John as a mighty hunter and woodsman still persists in the neighborhood, besides the handing

Lewis and Clark *Journals* uniformly spell it Colter, and it is so spelled in his autograph reproduced in the Douglas reprint of James, *Three Years*. Administration of his estate was taken out in the name of Coulter, which is also the form used by some of the early writers.

down of the same tradition, from generation to generation, among his kinsmen.

Of Colter's early life and schooling we have no record. Though he probably was not a highly educated man, the social surroundings and advantages of his family must have been above the average for that day, since one of his cousins became a doctor, and another a judge in the West. That John himself was far from being an ordinary and ignorant backwoodsman is also proved by the fact that on his death "three histories" were listed in the inventory of his estate.[4]

Some time prior to the autumn of 1803, Colter emigrated to Maysville, on the Ohio River. The exact time and the circumstances of his going are not known, nor can we determine what occupation he there followed, but it may safely be surmised, in view of his subsequent career, that in Kentucky he added to his skill in woodcraft. Two brothers of a family named Ray (cousins of John) are known to have gone to Kentucky from Virginia at about the same time, and it is possible he went with them to the new settlement.

In common with almost all other early frontiersmen, Colter left no written recollections, and his experiences must be pieced together from allusions or definite statements made by more articulate pioneers. The importance of his accomplishment was not realized until long after his death, and in fact remained almost unknown un-

[4] James, *Three Years*, p. 278.

til comparatively recent times. No one, apparently, took the trouble to get from him for permanent record any detailed information regarding his discoveries.

Thomas James, who in 1810 daily shared with Colter the hardships of a trapper's life, has given us a description of his appearance and qualities.[5] He was of sturdy frame, five feet ten inches in height, and had an open, ingenuous and pleasing countenance of the Daniel Boone type. "His character was that of the true American woodsman," declared James, "and his veracity was never questioned among those who knew him . . . Nature had formed him, like Daniel Boone, for hardy indurance of fatigue, privations and perils." According to James, Colter had in a supreme degree that instantaneous coördination of decision and action, in any desperate situation, that always characterized the greatest pioneers. He was an expert shot with a rifle, for he was a hunter with Lewis and Clark, and the *Journals* of the Expedition bear testimony to his efficiency in that respect.[6]

Of the purposes and results of the Lewis and Clark Exploration it is unnecessary to give details. When in 1803 Napoleon thrust Louisiana upon Jefferson like a foundling left on his politi-

[5] James, *Three Years*, p. 57.
[6] Thwaites, *Journals*, V, p. 51.

cal doorstep, the President reversed the preaching of his political creed — which had called for a Chinese wall around the United States — and enthusiastically entered into the development of the new part of the now vastly extended country. Even before the possibility of the purchase was known to him he had asked Congress to make a secret appropriation in support of an expedition to explore the then foreign territory.

So closely did the Lewis and Clark Expedition follow on the heels of the Treaty of Acquisition that on its arrival at St. Louis the Spanish commandant had not yet turned the territory over to the French, and the expedition established winter quarters across the Mississippi at the mouth of Wood River, in Illinois, where it remained until the Spanish received official instructions to deliver possession to France. As a result, in March of 1804, the flags of three sovereignties — Spain, France, and the United States — flew over St. Louis within a period of twenty-four hours.[7]

Lewis in the meantime had gone down the Ohio to select desirable men as recruits, and Colter was one of the first members of the expedition to enlist. He joined as a private on October 15, 1803, and his pay was five dollars a month.[8] Certainly that stipend was not extravagant for the nature of the work ahead.

[7] Stoddard, *Historical Sketches of Louisiana*, Phila., 1812, p. 102.
[8] Thwaites, *Journals*, payroll, VII, p. 360.

During the early part of the journey Colter was seldom mentioned in the diaries of the commanders, and then only in connection with the most undistinguished and routine work. But as time went on his natural ability evidently displayed itself for he became a hunter — a position of honor — and was frequently sent on important missions. His skill with the rifle; his faithfulness and reliability; and his unfailing good humor (only one argument with Druillard the interpreter, phonetically called Drewyer in the *Journals,* is recorded);[9] all made him a favorite not only with the commanders but also with the men, as is shown by the circumstances, to be described later, under which he left the Expedition.

Something of the change in Colter's status, if not indeed in the man himself, is revealed with unconscious humor in the following episodes. On March 3, 1804, by general orders, Colter, together with three others, was confined to camp for ten days for slipping out to visit one of those "last-chance" places of refreshment which even then existed at the edge of things. Three months later, however, on June 29, 1804, Colter himself sat as a member of a court martial in trial of two men who, while on duty, had taken whiskey from the stores of the expedition. He and the other members of the court imposed on the culprits a severe sentence by flogging.[10]

[9] Thwaites, *Journals,* IV, p. 366.
[10] *Id.,* I, pp. 10 and 61.

On April 14, 1805, the expedition reached the junction of the Little Missouri with its larger namesake. The place is marked on the map, in the Biddle edition of the *Journals,* as within one mile of the Mouse (Souris) River, a tributary of the Assiniboine, and therefore in the Hudson's Bay watershed. The spot has another interest, for the *Journals* say: "Beyond this no white man had ever been except two Frenchmen, one of whom, Lepage, is with us, and who, having lost their way, straggled a few miles farther, though to what point we could not ascertain."[11]

On October 8, 1805, the Expedition passed a creek which the commanders named Colter Creek, in honor of John Colter.[12] This stream is shown on modern maps as Potlatch Creek, which runs into the Clearwater or Kooskooskie River, in Idaho.

The only serious clash between the expedition and the Indians occurred on July 27, 1806, near Marias River on the return journey. Lewis was with Druillard and two brothers named Fields. They met a small band of Blackfeet and spent the night in their camp. Towards morning, while the others slept, one of the Fields, on guard, carelessly laid down his rifle. The Blackfeet attempted to seize the guns of the group, and one of the Indians was fatally stabbed in the melee that ensued when the awakened party regained

[11] Thwaites, *Journals,* I, p. 187.
[12] *Id.,* III, p. 99.

the arms. The rest of the savages fled and were driving off the horses of the whites when Lewis shot and killed a second Indian.[13] Some writers have ascribed the later hostility of the Blackfeet, which manifested itself in attack without warning on every white, to this encounter. There is good ground for belief, however, that the implacable enmity on the part of the tribe was largely due to Colter's subsequent accidental participation on the side of their foes, the Crows, in one of their battles, and that the Blackfeet bore no grudge for Lewis' act.[14]

[13] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 223.

[14] "It is an act of justice to the memory of the late Captain Lewis, to state that the Blackfeet Indians (in whose vicinity Lisa now lives) were so convinced of the propriety of his conduct in the renconter between him and a party of their people, in which two of them were killed, that they did not consider it a cause of war or hostility on their part; this is proved inasmuch as the first party of Lisa's men that were met by the Blackfeet were treated civilly. This circumstance induced Lisa to despatch one of his men (Coulter) to the fork of the Missouri to endeavor to find the Blackfeet nation and bring them to his establishment to trade. The messenger unfortunately fell in with a party of the Crow nation, with whom he stayed several days. While with them, they were attacked by their enemies the Blackfeet. Coulter in self defense took part with the Crows. He distinguished himself very much in the conflict; and the Blackfeet were defeated, having plainly observed a white man fighting in the ranks of their enemy. Coulter returned to the trading house. In traversing the same country a short time after, in company with another man, a party of the Blackfeet attempted to stop them without, however, evincing any hostile intentions; a renconter ensued in which the companion of Coulter and two Indians were killed and Coulter made his escape. The next time the whites were met by the Blackfeet, the latter attacked without any parley." Letter of Maj. Thomas Biddle to Col. Henry Atkinson, written from Camp Missouri, 29 Oct., 1819. *American State Papers, Indian Affairs,* II, p. 201.

Colter underwent the usual hardships and vicissitudes of such a journey; was lost on occasion; was sent on missions; and brought in meat when the camp had been hungry for days. He was once chased into the water by a grizzly and rather ignominiously rescued. At another time his horse fell and rolled on him, but he escaped injury.[15]

On the return journey the Expedition divided when it reached the headwaters of the Missouri, and Lewis, with a part of the men including Colter, went down the Missouri by the route used on the westward trip. Clark crossed over the ridge from the basin of the Gallatin River to the Yellowstone River just below the point where it leaves the mountains; followed the latter stream down along its banks for some distance; built canoes; and descended in them to its mouth. He first reached the Yellowstone at a spot near the present location of Livingston, Montana, and at that point therefore was not many miles below the Canyon of the Yellowstone. But instead of exploring up the river he hurried down, and thus unknowingly left to Colter the discovery of the following year.[16]

On July 29, 1806, as the *Journals* relate, while Lewis' division of the party was descending the

[15] Thwaites, *Journals*, II, p. 29; II, p. 171; V, p. 144.
[16] *Id.*, V, 245 *et seq.*

Missouri and approaching Fort Mandan (about sixty miles above the present city of Bismarck, South Dakota), Colter and an associate, Collins, were sent out hunting in a canoe. On August 3rd the party passed the canoe on the bank but did not see the hunters. On the 5th the expedition waited all morning for them, and then went on, and Colter did not catch up with Lewis until August 12.[17] On the preceding day an event had occurred that was destined to determine the entire aftercourse of Colter's life.

Clark says in his *Journal* for August 11, 1806:[18]

"I observed a canoe near the shore. I directed the canoes to land here I found two men from the Illinois Jos. Dixon and [Forrest] Handcock[19] these men are on a trapping expedition up the River Rochejone. They inform me that they left the Illinois in the summer 1804. the last winter they spent with the Tetons in company with a Mr. Coartong who brought up goods to trade. the Tetons robed him of the greater part of the goods and wounded this Dixon in the leg with a

[17] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 243.

[18] *Id.,* V, p. 243.

[19] Joseph Dickson was from Illinois, and Forrest Hancock from Boone's settlement (a few miles above the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri), according to a note by Clark. Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 344. Dickson was a native of Pennsylvania, went to St. Clair County, Illinois, in 1802, and later to Sangamon County, Illinois, where he became one of the early settlers. He died in 1844. *Wisconsin Hist. Soc. Collections,* V, p. 315.

hard wad. The Tetons gave Mr. Coartong some few robes for the articles thay took from him."

For some reason Biddle, in paraphrasing the *Journals,*[20] so distorts this statement as to make it appear that Dickson and Hancock were the thieves who robbed Mr. Ceautoin, as he spells the name.

These two were the first white men any of the expedition had seen since leaving the Mandan village on the way west on April 15, 1805.

Lewis says, August 12, 1806:[21]

"Being anxious to overtake Capt. Clark, who from the appearance of his camps could be no great distance before me, we set out early and proceeded with all possible expedition. At eight A.M. the bowman informed me that there was a canoe and a camp he believed of whitemen on the north east shore. I directed the perogue and canoes to come too at this place and found it to be the camp of two hunters from the Illinois by name Joseph Dickson and Forrest Hancock. these men informed me that Capt. Clark had passed them about noon the day before. They also informed me that they had left the Illinois in the summer of 1804, since which time they had been ascended the Missouri, hunting and trapping beaver; that they had been robed by the

[20] *History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark,* Phila., 1814, II, p. 408. Coues surmises this may have been Chouteau.

[21] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 242.

Indians and the former wounded last winter by the Tetons of the birnt woods; that they had hitherto been unsuccessful in their voyage having as yet caught but little beaver, but were still determined to proceed. I gave them a short description of the Missouri, a list of distances of the most conspicuous streams and remarkable places on the river above and pointed out to them the places where the beaver most abounded. I also gave them a file and a couple of pounds of powder, with some lead. these were articles which they assured me they were in great want of. I remained with these men an hour and half, when I took leave of them and proceeded. While I halted with these men, Colter and Collins who separated from us on the 3rd inst. rejoined us. They were well, no accident having happened. they informed me that after proceeding the first day and not overtaking us, they had concluded that we were behind and had delayed several days in waiting for us, and had thus been unable to join us until the present moment."

The *Journals* continue, August 12, 1806:[22]

"Dixon and Handcock, the two men we had met above, came down, intending to proceed on down with us to the Mandans."

On August 16, 1806, at the Mandan Village, Clark described the negotiations with the Mandan chiefs regarding the arrangements for one of them to accompany the Expedition to Wash-

[22] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 335.

ington to visit the "Great Father," and then wrote:[23]

"Colter, one of our men expressed a desire to join some trappers who offered to become shearers with him and furnish traps &c the offer was a very advantageous one to him, his services could be dispensed with from this down and as we were disposed to be of service to one of our party who had performed their duty as well as Colter had done, we agreed to allow him the privilege provided no one of the party would ask or expect a similar permission to which they all agreed that they wished Colter every success and that as we did not wish any of them to separate until we Should arrive at St. Louis they could not apply or expect it &c. . . . . We gave Jo Colter Some Small articles which we did not want and some powder and lead. the party also gave him several articles which will be useful to him on his expedition."

Regarding this arrangement with Colter, Biddle inserted some observations of his own, as follows:[24]

"The example of this man shows how easily men may be weaned from the habits of a civilized life to the ruder, but scarcely less fascinating manners of the woods. This hunter had now been absent for many years from the frontiers, and might naturally be presumed to have some anx-

[23] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 341.
[24] Biddle, *History,* II, p. 408.

iety, or some curiosity at least to return to his friends and his country; yet just at the moment when he is approaching the frontiers, he is tempted by a hunting scheme, to give up those delightful prospects, and go back without the least reluctance to the solitude of the woods."

None of this is in the records written by either Lewis or Clark.

Sergeant Gass gives the following version of the same events:[25]

"Friday 15th" [Sept. 1806] "We had a fine clear pleasant morning, and continued here all day to ascertain whether any of the chiefs would go down with us or not.—They had to hold counsels among themselves, and we had to wait for their answers. The two hunters we had left up the river, came down, staid with us here, and got one of our party to join in partnership with them, and to return up the rivers Missouri and Jaune [Yellowstone] to hunt.

"Sat 16th. . . . In the afternoon the chief called the Big-White concluded to go down with us, and we agreed to stay until 12 o'clock tomorrow; that he might have an opportunity to get ready for his voyage and mission. The commanding Officers gave discharges to the man who agreed to return with the hunters up the river,

[25] Gass, *Journal,* Pittsburgh, 1807, p. 252. Sergeant Patrick Gass was the last survivor of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and died in Wellsburg, West Virginia, in 1870. Wheeler, *"Wonderland,* 1900," St. Paul, 1900, p. 17.

and the interpreter; who intends settling among these Indians, and to whom they gave the blacksmith's tools supposing they might be useful to the nation. They also gave a small piece of ordnance to the Grossventers, which they appeared very fond of.

"Sunday 17th. There were some flying clouds this morning, and the weather was cold for the season. The two strange hunters, with the man who had received his discharge and was to go up the river with them, went on early. . . . At noon we dropped down to the village of the Big-White."

From the day on which Colter and his two companions started back up the Missouri, until the next spring, details of his movements are lacking, but doubtless the autumn and winter were spent as they had planned, in hunting and trapping beaver along the upper reaches of the Missouri.

The partnership was dissolved by the spring of 1807, possibly because the three had met no better success than Dickson and Hancock had previously enjoyed. Colter then separated from his companions and made his way alone in a canoe down the Missouri, with St. Louis as his destination.[26]

But the fates interposed an objection and again vetoed his resolution to return to civiliza-

[26] H. M. Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana, Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River,* Pittsburgh, 1814, p. 90.

tion. A chance meeting with Lisa caused him to reverse his course and led to those final and crowded years of peril and adventure during which his discoveries were achieved.

CHAPTER II

COLTER'S ROUTE IN 1807

THE reports of Lewis and Clark on the abundance of beaver far up the Missouri had determined Manuel Lisa,[1] a young and enterprising fur trader of St. Louis, to make an expedition to the rich new regions. He accordingly formed a partnership[2] with George Druillard, Colter's half-breed companion of the Lewis and Clark days, and set out by boat in the spring of 1807 with a well organized party.

At the mouth of the Platte they met Colter coming down, as has been stated, and Lisa persuaded him to turn back and join his brigade.[3] So for nearly three years more Colter remained in the Wilderness.

At the Arikara villages further up the river

[1] Manuel Lisa was born of Spanish parents at New Orleans in 1772. At one time he had from the Spanish government a monopoly of the trade with the Osages. Though distrusted by his associates, his ability made him a partner in most of the expeditions up the Missouri. He ascended that river at least twelve times and spent seven winters in the Wilderness. He was particularly successful in dealing with the Indians, and during the War of 1812 rendered great services by keeping them from hostilities. He died in 1820. See Chittenden, *Amer. Fur Trade,* New York, 1902, I, p. 125, and *Missouri Historical Soc. Collections,* III.

[2] Billon, *Annals of St. Louis,* 1888, entry for 1807.

[3] Brackenridge, *Views,* p. 90.

two or three hundred warriors of that tribe halted the boats. An encounter was narrowly averted by the resolute demeanor of the party, and by their evident preparations for defense with rifles and the two small swivels which were then a much feared novelty to the Indians. At the Mandan villages there was again a threat of trouble, which Lisa managed to avoid. At a point still further on several thousand Assiniboines dashed to the shore to intercept the flotilla. "The whole prairie," as Lisa expressed it, "was red with them, some on horseback, some on foot, and all painted for war." But the sudden and unexpected discharge of the swivels struck them with terror, and most of them fled. The chiefs remained, and soon the pipe of peace was smoking at the encampment.[4]

Lisa's party went up the Yellowstone River to the mouth of the Big Horn where he built a trading post named Fort Raymond, after his son, but commonly called Manuel's Fort. Owing to unforeseen delays they did not reach this location until November 21, 1807, and so lost the fall trapping season, as Lisa afterward complained.[5] Quarters and a trading house were immediately started, but the blockhouse was not erected until the following year. Manuel's Fort is correctly located, with the date 1807, on Clark's map in the Biddle edition of the Lewis and Clark narrative.

[4] Brackenridge, *Views*, p. 90.

[5] *Missouri Historical Soc. Colls.*, III, pp. 255-6.

Colter's Route in 1807

A photographic reproduction from the map in the 1814 version of the *Journals*

Since trading with the Indians as well as trapping was an important phase of the project, and since the delay in commencing to trap had already cost him dear, Lisa determined to send a messenger to notify the surrounding savages at once that his post would welcome their trade. He also wanted to gather additional information about desirable trapping territory.

Colter was entrusted with this mission as the man best qualified to achieve its purpose. Besides his experience with the Expedition to the Pacific he had hunted and trapped during the preceding winter along the Yellowstone and some of its tributaries, and was therefore familiar with a much greater extent of country than anyone else in the party. Then, too, he had picked up some of the language of the savages in the vicinity. He was known as hardy and reliable; accustomed to make his way alone; and accordingly not to be deterred by any ordinary obstacle.

Because of all these circumstances his start on the mission in question must necessarily have begun late in November. Hence he must have made most of the journey under winter conditions, involving deep snow in many places and intense cold. It may be taken for granted that he was equipped with snowshoes, whose use he had opportunity to learn during the previous winter with Dickson and Hancock. Ice and cold and snow never daunted him, for during each of the

next two winters he made long journeys between Manuel's Fort and the Three Forks, as will be related hereafter.

Under such conditions Colter set forth alone soon after the establishment of the new post.[6] On this expedition he made the discoveries that have given him a permanent place in history.

We have no direct statement from him concerning his journey. The only record of it, except the tradition handed down among the trappers, was that prepared by Captain Clark for the map of the Lewis and Clark "track across the western portion of North America," which is reproduced in the History of the Expedition published in 1814. Fortunately that map contains conclusive proof of Colter's feat.

When Colter at last arrived in St. Louis in May of 1810 Lewis was dead, and Clark had become Brigadier General of Militia and Agent for Indian Affairs for the Territory of Missouri.

[6] "He shortly after despatched Coulter, the hunter before mentioned, to bring some of the Indian nations to trade. This man, with a pack of thirty pounds weight, his gun and some ammunition, went upwards of five hundred miles to the Crow nation; gave them information, and proceeded from thence to several other tribes. On his return a party of Indians in whose company he happened to be was attacked and he was lamed by a severe wound in the leg; notwithstanding which he returned to the establishment, entirely alone and without assistance." Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana*, p. 91.

There is here evidently a confusion of the mission in the text with a similar one made the next year when Colter took part in a battle against the Blackfeet.

Clark was in Virginia at the time, but soon returned, and to him Colter told the story of his discoveries. Clark added this new information to the map he had already prepared, marking it "Colter's Route in 1807," and it so appears on the engraved map which states that it was copied "from the original drawing of Wm. Clark."[7] The relevant part of this map, showing the "Route," is herein reproduced opposite page 44.

There are a number of peculiar features in the "Route" of Colter as laid down by Clark, and these have given rise to puzzling problems which have heretofore been considered insoluble by commentators. But it is possible that a careful analysis of certain known facts, and their consideration in connection with preconceived or mistaken ideas held by both Colter and Clark, will clarify the whole matter.

While going over mountains and along water

[7] Clark in Fincastle, Virginia, in the spring of 1810, turned over to Biddle the records of his exploration, and a map (Letter, Biddle to Tilghman, April 6, 1818; Thwaites, *Journals,* VII, p. 408).

December 20, 1810, Clark wrote Biddle from St. Louis, enclosing another map, "which I have drawn for my book. . . . it is made on the same scale of the one you have, containing more country." Coues, *History of Lewis and Clark Expedition,* New York, 1893, p. LXXXV.

Coues says this is the map finally engraved and published. The "more country" must refer to the discoveries of Colter, who arrived while Clark was in Virginia, and of course after the first map was delivered. Still later information must, however, have been received before the map was engraved, for the map shows Henry's River, where Andrew Henry went after Colter returned. James, *Three Years,* p. 83.

courses Colter necessarily travelled by a more tortuous route than is shown on the map, and it may be taken for granted that he sought for and used the easiest paths and passes he could find, whereas the map only roughly indicates his route. He was not a skilled surveyor or map-maker, and any route-sketches he drew during his travels, or afterward in aid of Clark, could have been little more than approximations of his line of travel.

We must also consider the reports Colter had of the region and his preconceptions concerning it, for it will be found that both his journey itself, and certain erroneous inferences afterward made by the map-maker, were strongly influenced by these prior ideas.

The Indians had told Clark of the headwaters of the Yellowstone and the Big Horn. In the *Journals,* under date of July 26, 1806, and discussing the Big Horn, he says:[8]

"It takes its rise in the Rocky Mountains with the heads of the River Plate and at no great distance from the river Rochejhone [Yellowstone] and passes between the Coat Nor [Côté Noir] or Black Mountains and the most easterly range of the Rocky Mountains."

And of the Yellowstone he says under date of August 3, 1806:[9]

"The Rochejhone or Yellowstone river is large and navagable, with but fiew obstructions, quite

[8] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 297.
[9] *Id.,* V, p. 319.

into the Rocky Mountains, and probably 'to-head" [to its source].[10]

While among the Mandans during his westward journey Lewis had made a map, based on Indian information, of the territory he expected to explore, and had sent it to President Jefferson on April 7, 1805. This map, among other inaccuracies, shows the Yellowstone River as extending far to the south of its true source and as taking its rise as far south as thirty-eight degrees forty-five minutes north latitude (the approximate latitude of St. Louis) whereas it actually has its source at about forty-four degrees north latitude. No lake is shown.[11]

Colter of course had acquired all the mistaken geographical ideas possessed by his commanders, since his only sources of information prior to his own explorations of 1807, were Lewis and Clark themselves, or the Indians who had talked with them. Lewis in his entry of August 12, 1806, states that he told Colter's future trapping companions (Dickson and Hancock) what he knew of the upper Missouri and its tributaries, and that Colter rejoined the party during that discussion. This incident occurred just before the Expedition reached the Mandan villages on its return

[10] The spelling is Clark's. At his best, or worst, he could push even Jacob Fowler for originality of orthography. However, as Seymour Dunbar says in his *"History of Travel in America,"* referring to a similar implacable enemy of the dictionary, "The man who helps to make an empire may spell as he chooses."

[11] A copy of this map accompanies Coues, *History of Lewis and Clark Expedition.*

journey, and it was during this second sojourn with the Mandans that Colter, Dickson and Hancock formed their partnership. So Colter was dependent for his information on the same group of natives who had unwittingly deceived Lewis respecting the country Colter was destined to penetrate. From these known facts it is fair to assume that Colter, previous to his journey, entertained the same misconceptions of the unknown region and its rivers which were held by Lewis and Clark, and that had been embodied in the map sent by Lewis to Jefferson; and that he at first shaped his exploration under the influence of the mistakes in question. A study of "Colter's Route in 1807" sustains this conclusion.

A careful examination of the Clark map will show several serious inaccuracies as well as some minor ones. The major errors may be plainly seen on comparison with a modern map, and are:

I. The Three Forks (of the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers) are shown by Clark to be north and east of Lake Eustis (Yellowstone Lake), whereas the Forks in fact lie to the north and west.[12]

[12] Lake Eustis was named for William Eustis, Secretary of War under Madison, 1809-1812. It was later called Sublette's Lake, *e.g.*, on the 1849 map of Charles Wilkes, U. S. N., after William Sublette, the bourgeois of the twenties and thirties, and finally became known as Yellowstone Lake.

Lake Biddle was named for Nicholas Biddle, editor of the first version of the Lewis and Clark *Journals*. Later called Jackson Lake. On the Keeler Government Map, 1867, it is called Lyon's Lake.

II. Lake Biddle (Jackson Lake) is shown well to the west instead of almost due south of Lake Eustis.

III. Lake Biddle is made to drain into the Big Horn instead of into the Snake, and is accordingly placed on the wrong side of the Continental Divide.

IV. The Rio Del Norte (Rio Grande) is shown with its sources approaching close to Lake Biddle, whereas its headwaters are very much to the south.

V. A stream between Lakes Eustis and Biddle is shown running due east into the Stinkingwater River.

In analyzing the Clark map and seeking for these pages the origin and explanation of these inaccuracies, it was discovered that the particular area in the map covered by and embracing Colter's "Route" is laid down on a scale very much larger than the rest of the map.

Using the scales of latitude and longitude marked on the Clark map it will be found that the east and west limits of the "Route" are there shown to be, approximately, 107 degrees 10 minutes west and 112 degrees 25 minutes west; a range, accordingly, of 5 degrees 15 minutes. Locating these same places (the headwaters of Pryor's Fork and the west side of the Tetons) on an accurate map it will be found that the correct readings are, respectively, 108 degrees 30 minutes west and 111 degrees 30 minutes west, or a range

of only 3 degrees. This is not much more than half the range indicated by Clark.

A similar discrepancy will by a like process be found in the north and south limits of the "Route" area, though the error of magnification is not so great.

In addition to making the distances of Colter's "Route" too great, the rest of the country in this region is made too small. For example, the correct longitudinal distance between the Three Forks and the mouth of Pryor's Fork (these points on the map being taken for the ease and certainty of their identification) is four degrees ten minutes, whereas the Clark map shows it as only two degrees forty minutes.

Whatever may have been the cause of these errors — whether Clark was mistaken when he wrote to Biddle stating that the "Colter's Route" region was on the same scale as the rest of the map, or whether the draftsman blundered — these mistakes brought about a gross distortion of the map, and by causing an extension of the "Route" far to the west pushed Lake Eustis beyond the Three Forks, and placed Lake Biddle still further out of its actual position.

Clark's erroneous attribution of Lake Biddle (Jackson) to the Big Horn watershed is probably due to a faulty assumption, based on previous observations by himself and Lewis around the headwaters of the Three Forks. The Continental Divide there runs roughly in a north and south

direction; the waters on the east feeding the Missouri, and on the west, the Snake. Modern geological survey maps show that at a point just west of Yellowstone Lake the Divide takes a distinct turn to the east, and in fact passes between Yellowstone and Jackson Lakes, and then again turns towards the south. It is interesting to note that neither Colter nor Clark realized that Colter crossed the Continental Divide at any stage of his journey. Mistake is easy in such a case in the absence of accurate surveys, and they undoubtedly supposed that the Divide continued south past Jackson Lake. Also Colter evidently did not go far enough south on the Snake River below Lake Biddle to see its outlet between the Teton and Gros Ventre Ranges. He apparently believed that any southern outlet must be blocked by the latter range, so he assumed that the river flowing out of Lake Biddle must necessarily run east.

The crossing of the Tetons brought Colter to another stream, marked on the Clark map as "Colter's River" and wrongly shown there as a tributary of the Rio del Norte, which actually is nowhere near. All the Teton region is in the Snake watershed. This erroneous attribution was doubtless due to misleading information received from the Indians, for Lewis in the *Journals* says the Yellowstone "has its extreme sources with the North River in the Rocky Mountains, on the confines of New Mexico."[13]

[13] Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 320.

This error was confirmed in the mind of Clark by the map of Major Zebulon M. Pike, which among other mistakes showed the Rio del Norte and the Yellowstone close together at their sources.[14]

Pike, by order of General Wilkinson, had made an exploration of the Arkansas River in the years 1806-7. He went to its headwaters whence he proceeded to the Rio del Norte (Rio Grande). The latter stream he thought, or at least pretended to think, to be the Red River and therefore in American territory, until a detachment of Spanish troops intercepted him as an invader and escorted him to Santa Fe, a virtual prisoner.

Major Pike was not very successful at identifying rivers, for on this same exploration he also supposed he had reached the source of the Yellowstone. This was in January of 1807, so that if his guess had been correct, he had preceded Colter. His map shows a loop of his travel-route touching the headwaters of "Yellow Stone River, Branch of the Missouri." The beginning of the river is shown with a symbol indicating the limit of exploration. The map locates this small portion of the stream due east of the sources of the Arkansas. The only related statement in Pike's text is to the effect that he saw a stream from a

[14] Plate II, Chart of the Internal Part of Louisiana, in Pike, *Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi and Through the Western Parts of Louisiana,* Phila., 1810.

mountain, and as he says "supposed [it] to be the Pierre Jaun."[15]

Actually Pike never was within hundreds of miles of the Yellowstone. His farthest north on this journey was close to Pike's Peak, so that he did not reach the present Wyoming at all. The latitude of his supposed Yellow Stone River headwaters is indicated on his map as approximately forty-one degrees forty minutes north, in contrast to the actual forty-four degrees north.

The Department of War had no doubt furnished Pike with a copy of the 1805 map made by Lewis among the Mandans, and Pike had obtained from it the idea entertained by Lewis and Clark, namely, that the Yellowstone River extended far to the south. He also had received similar mistaken reports from Spanish sources, for in his *Map of the Internal Provinces of New Spain,* in the *Account,* he again placed the source of the Yellowstone near the headwaters of the Arkansas and Rio del Norte, under the name of "Rio de Piedro Amaretto del Missouri" (an engraver's error, or a corrupt form of the Spanish "Rio de la Piedra Amarilla del Missouri").

In his *Account,* Pike — with optimistic assurance — said the sources of the Yellowstone, Missouri, Platte, Rio del Norte, Colorado and Arkansas were so close together that he could take a position in the mountains from which he

[15] Pike, *Account,* p. 182.

could visit the source of any of them in one day.[16]

Upon a comparison of these charts Clark's map shows the same errors concerning the Arkansas and Del Norte. It is thus plain that Clark copied from Pike, whose book was copyrighted in 1808 and published in 1810, and so was available to the draftsman of the Clark map. Clark's map even shows on the Nanesi branch of the Arkansas, "Block House, U. S. Factory in 1806" which Pike erected at that time and place. It also shows "Highest Peak" (Pike's Peak).

It seems sufficiently obvious from these circumstances that Pike accepted the grossly inaccurate Lewis map, and that Clark in his turn confidingly followed Pike, thus completing the vicious circle.

The stream shown on the Clark map between Lakes Eustis and Biddle and flowing to the east into a tributary of the Stinkingwater, cannot be accounted for except as a complete error of memory on Colter's part or as a blunder of the draftsman or engraver. There is some indication that it may have been the latter. The map shows a line too heavy for the very short stream at the north end of Lake Biddle. This line breaks off abruptly just before it touches the eastwardly flowing stream. Possibly the two were originally intended to be joined. If that be done and the eastern end be erased, thus reversing the flow, we should have a rough indication of the upper

[16] Pike, *Account,* Appendix to Part II, p. 8.

Snake. The draftsman or engraver may have worked from a sketch showing a stream lacking an outlet because of a gap in the line, and may have mistakenly extended the line eastwardly to a connection with the Salt Fork in an effort to complete the map.

The apparently aimless course taken by Colter leads over several minor watersheds, carries him twice across the Continental Divide, and when studied for an indication of what he was trying to do, has heretofore been considered inexplicable. But careful analysis shows there is a simple solution which will serve as a logical explanation of the journey, its supposedly strange route, and its purposes.

Assume that when he left Pryor's Fork his objective was the Yellowstone River near its head. He thought the headwaters of the Yellowstone extended far to the south of their actual location. Accordingly he went too far to the south. Discovering his error he turned back and corrected it, soon finding the object of his search. His exploration being completed he returned to Lisa's headquarters.

Let this hypothesis be applied to what he did. The "Route" at best only roughly shows his course. Natural features such as mountain chains are not accurately located or delineated. But a comparison with a modern map will disclose that

in every case in which Colter is shown as crossing a mountain chain, there is such a chain in about that place, and also a pass at about that point. Therefore in regard to the line of travel itself the map is conclusive evidence of the truth of the journey, since the region was previously wholly unknown, and subsequent surveys have confirmed all the essential details. Errors there are in plenty, but they relate to features outside the line of travel.

In reconstructing his course it may be safely asserted that Colter, when crossing a mountain chain, in each case used an existing pass near to the line shown on the Route. The author in the following discussion of Colter's journey has accordingly inserted the name of the appropriate pass as being the one he most probably used, though in one or two instances, which do not affect the analysis, Colter might have taken an alternative pass.

Starting at the head of Pryor's Fork, Colter went through Pryor's Gap and thence a short distance west until he came to Clark's Fork, which he ascended to its source, his direction being steadily to the southwest. He then turned south for a short distance and struck the Stinkingwater (Shoshone) at the "Boiling Spring." Ascending the Stinkingwater and skirting the Absaroka Mountains he still held to his general southwestern direction. He next reached the Wind River Mountains and the headwaters of the

river of that name, which is a tributary of the Big Horn.

His course from that locality indicates he was taking a large circling route to the west and south in order to intersect the headwaters of the Yellowstone, which, due to his false information, he supposed to lie much to the south and west of their true position. He was confirmed in this belief by what Clark had told him: namely, that the Yellowstone was a very considerable stream at the point near the present town of Livingston where Clark had crossed it. In nearly all rivers such a large volume of water would indicate a much longer upper basin as its source of supply than is the case with the Yellowstone. Its abrupt issuance as a large river is marked.

Colter was compelled to search for a way between the Absaroka and Wind River Mountains and probably found one at the crossing now known as Union Pass leading to the upper waters of the Gros Ventre River. This pass took him immediately and unexpectedly into Jackson Hole and to Jackson Lake. Still searching for the Yellowstone, and with the mistaken idea that its upper reaches lay yet further to the west, he sought for and discovered a pass through the Tetons. Crossing these mountains by Teton Pass he found on their western side no stream of a size or direction of flow which could be the Yellowstone, and therefore he realized he must have penetrated into another watershed. (He was then

in Pierre's Hole, and on the Colter's River of the Clark map, there erroneously shown as a tributary of the Rio Grande, instead of the Snake). So he turned back and recrossed the Tetons at a more northern point, perhaps by way of Conant Creek. Descending the east slope of the Tetons he reached the Snake River above Jackson Lake, and went up that stream to the mouth of the present Coulter Creek, which can be located on a modern map at almost the exact center of the southern boundary of Yellowstone Park. Thence, following the bend in the Snake, he proceeded north, at last in the true direction to reach the headwaters of the Yellowstone. This he soon did at Yellowstone Lake itself.

He doubtless proceeded on the last stage of his quest by what must even then have been a passable way since it is now a recognized trail. This runs north from the mouth of Coulter Creek; goes west of Heart Lake; thence continues northwest to the east shore of Lewis Lake, and finally extends north over the Divide, there a low barrier, to Yellowstone Lake.

His general course through this part of his journey is shown roughly on the Clark map by a semi-circular line indicating first the eastwardly and then the northward direction.

There is at the present time a wagon road, formerly a trail, which runs north from about the point where Colter first reached the Snake River after descending the Tetons. It follows up the

Lewis River to Lewis Lake. Such a path Colter might have taken had he known he could get through, since it would have shortened his course. But during the investigations preliminary to these pages it was substantially established that he continued on to Coulter Creek. This is determined by the discovery that at Coulter Creek he blazed a tree and carved his initials on its trunk to serve as a record and as a landmark for any future journey.

Many years after, Philip Ashton Rollins and two companions came upon the old blaze. Due to the high standing and expert woodcraft of all the persons concerned there can be small doubt that the record was made in Colter's time and by Colter himself. Rollins' own statement, for use in this volume, is as follows:

"In September of 1889, Tazewell Woody (Theodore Roosevelt's hunting guide), John H. Dewing (also a hunting guide) and I, found on the left side of Coulter Creek, some fifty feet from the water and about three quarters of a mile above the creek's mouth, a large pine tree on which was a deeply indented blaze, which after being cleared of sap and loose bark was found to consist of a cross thus 'X' (some five inches in height), and, under it, the initials 'J C' (each some four inches in height).

"The blaze appeared to these trained hunting guides, so they stated to me, to be approximately eighty years old.

"They refused to fell the tree and so obtain the exact age of the blaze because they said they guessed the blaze had been made by Colter himself.

"The find was reported to the Government authorities, and the tree was cut down by them in 1889 or 1890, in order that the blazed section might be installed in a museum, but as I was told in the autumn of 1890 by the then superintendent of the Yellowstone Park, the blazed section had been lost in transit.

"Woody and Dewing were each so expert in 'reading sign' as to be incapable of serious error in estimating the approximate age of a blaze."

As Colter was never in this part of the country again, but afterward confined his activities to a region north and west of the Lake, he must have cut this proof of his presence during his memorable journey of 1807.

Having thus reached Yellowstone Lake Colter kept on until he came to the River which he followed until he struck the Bannock Trail, a well defined Indian path, and thence went east to Clark's Fork. Then instead of going the remainder of the way by the path he had come he apparently determined to explore the lower Stinkingwater. So he made the short trip back to the "Boiling Spring"; went down the Stinkingwater and the Big Horn until he was close to Pryor's Gap, to which he made his way; and returned to his original point of departure.

This solution of the travel-route affords a logical explanation of all the movements made by Colter on his journey. To assume that he first went to the Yellowstone River, is to substitute an aimless wandering for a purposeful exploration which was altogether consistent with and determined by what he had been told of the region. In the light of a definite desire to discover the supposedly distant headwaters of the Yellowstone, and to examine the surrounding region, Colter's course is thus established as an intelligent, persistent, and finally successful search.

CHAPTER III

COLTER'S YELLOWSTONE DISCOVERIES

BESIDES the determination of the source of the Yellowstone River and the discovery of the Lake, the additions to geographical knowledge made by Colter on this journey were very considerable. He explored and made known the upper waters of Clark's Fork and the Big Horn; the course of the Shoshone River; the Absaroka, Wind River and Teton Mountains; Jackson Lake and Hole; Pierre's Hole; and several important passes, including Pryor's Gap, Union Pass and Teton Pass. He was also the first to visit the sources of Snake River above Jackson Lake, but did not recognize them as such, since he confused them with the waters of the Big Horn.

His course in connection with Jackson Lake and the Tetons is too definitely shown to render it probable that he attained either Green River or the Rio Grande, as some have supposed him to have done, for the "Route" plainly indicates he crossed the Tetons, travelled a short distance north while on their western slope, and then recrossed. There are none but tributaries of the Snake River in that locality, and it is these he must necessarily have reached. The "Route" does not carry him far enough from the Tetons

for him to have entered any other possible watershed, and as a consequence the attribution of the Rio del Norte to the "Colter's River" of the map is certainly erroneous.

However, before reaching Jackson Hole and while making his way across the Wind River Mountains it is barely possible, though highly improbable, that he may have touched some of the headwaters of the Green, though the "Route" indicates he passed considerably north of them.

The Canyon of Yellowstone River is indicated on Clark's map by the mountains shown close on each side of the stream, but there is no hint of either of the Falls. As Colter, according to the "Route," did not follow the shore of Yellowstone Lake, but only touched its extreme western edge and then struck across country until he reached the River at some point on the Canyon, it is fairly certain that he came to the River below the Falls and therefore failed to see them. The Falls are cut off from any view from a distance by rocky walls, and by the turns in the River.[1]

The "Route" gives Colter's crossing of the River at the lower end of the Canyon, which would be at Tower Falls, where there is a ford.

[1] It is a curious circumstance that Lewis had heard of the Falls from some Indian source, but later concluded that the information so obtained was incorrect. He wrote in the original *Journals,* as they appear in manuscript, as follows, "there is also a considerable fall on this river (Yellowstone) within the mountains, but at what distance we never could learn." This particular entry is markd by Lewis in red ink, followed by the word "No." Thwaites, V, p. 320.

In the spring of 1810 Henry M. Brackenridge, a young lawyer, went to Upper Louisiana and spent some time in St. Louis where he met Colter. In one of a series of sketches contributed to the *Louisiana Gazette,* printed on April 18, 1811, in discussing new discoveries in the Far West, Brackenridge said:

"The course of the Rocky mountains, is nearly north and south, and about the same length with the Allegheny mountain, but much higher, and more resembling the Alps or Andes. Immense peaks, and clothed with eternal snows. They subside towards the south, and are lost before they reach the gulph of California. At the head of the Gallatin Fork, and of the Grosse Corne of the Yellow stone, from discoveries since the voyage of Lewis and Clark, it is found less difficult to cross than the Allegheny mountains; Coulter, a celebrated hunter and woodsman, informed me, that a loaded waggon would find no obstruction in passing."

This, so far as is known, was the first public and printed statement declaring the possibility of crossing the Rocky Mountains by wagon, and was of course based on observations made by Colter during his numerous overland trips between Manuel's Fort and the Three Forks in the period that followed the exploration of 1807.

In the discussion that follows it should be borne in mind that Clark had turned over all his

documents and records to Biddle before he received Colter's account of the journey. As a consequence the "Route" was not accompanied by any explanatory text, and Colter's explorations are not referred to in the printed *Journals*, except by the map itself.

The map's avowals regarding the abnormal phenomena of the region are the "Boiling Spring" on the Stinkingwater; the "Fossil" on the mountain just south of Lake Eustis; and the "Hot Spring Brimstone" near the lower end of the Yellowstone Canyon.

The particular "Boiling Spring" thus designated has apparently disappeared. This is not an uncommon occurrence in the district. Langford mentions a similar spring visited by him which ceased to function within two years thereafter.[2]

To what "Fossil" refers is unknown. Colter apparently found something similar to the petrified fish seen on September 10, 1804, on the bank of the Missouri.[3] Its location within the loop of the "Route," and well off the line of travel, shows that Colter on occasion made side trips either in search of mountain passes or for other geographical knowledge.

[2] *Folsom-Cook Exploration of the Upper Yellowstone in the Year* 1869, by David E. Folsom, reprinted by Langford, St. Paul, 1894, preface.

[3] The *Journals* relate, Thwaites, I, p. 144, "On a hill on the L. S. we found the back bone of a fish 45 feet long tapering to the tale, some teeth &c those joints were separated and all petrified."

The "Hot Spring Brimstone," from its location near the lower end of the Yellowstone Canyon can hardly be other than Mammoth Hot Springs. The word "Brimstone" doubtless refers to other eruptive manifestations in the vicinity which later caused the locality to be known as a "Hell."

The orientation of the map is faulty, as the course of the "Route" from the west end of the Lake to the upper canyon is shown by the chart to be northeast, whereas the true course between these points is almost due north.

The "Route" suggests that in going from the West Thumb of the Lake to the River, Colter passed to the east of the main geyser basins, and accordingly missed those particular features of the region. It is significant that Clark did not note any geyser on his map. That he accepted Colter's statements seems proved by the inclusion of the "Route" in the map. It is almost certain that Colter did not report any geyser, for if he had, Clark would surely have given some indication of the presence of some phenomenon at the location where a geyser was reported to exist. Clark did show the hot springs, which were no novelty to him, since the *Journals* mention such springs at various points, but which in this case were sufficiently out of the ordinary to warrant their indication on the map of the "Route."

If, contrary to every probability, Clark was told of the geysers, it is possible that he may have

doubted the accuracy of Colter's statement in this regard or hesitated to sponsor it. But the better conclusion is that geysers were not reported at all.

Another possibility is that previously, among the trappers at Manuel's Fort, Colter had been so laughed down at his attempt to describe the wonders he had seen that he then decided to keep silence thereafter. But this is so little in accord with his character that it may be dismissed.

The legend of "Colter's Hell" suggests that Colter vividly described certain volcanic manifestations, but for some reason not now discoverable, the full story of his adventures was never given to the world in any authentic version, and survived only as a wondertale among his fellows.

An idea of the legend as it took shape among the trappers, and as it was circulated from mouth to mouth on the long marches in the fur country and around the fires of the rendezvous, may be obtained from Irving's *Bonneville,* written a generation after Colter's death. Irving says:[4]

"A Volcanic tract of similar character is found on Stinking River, one of the tributaries of the Big Horn, which takes it unhappy name from the odor derived from sulphurous springs and streams. The last mentioned place was first discovered by Colter, a hunter belonging to Lewis and Clark's exploring party, who came upon it in the course of his lonely wanderings, and gave such

[4] *The Rocky Mountains,* Philadelphia, 1837, I, p. 223.

an account of its gloomy terrors, its hidden fires, smoking pits, noxious streams and the all-pervading 'smell of brimstone' that it received and has ever since retained among the trappers the name of 'Colter's Hell!' "

Irving thus declared that Colter came back with the description of a volcanic area which we now know could only fit the Yellowstone country. And Irving also stated that the region in question "was first discovered by Colter." He accepted the story, and his only substantial error in repeating it lay in placing the "Hell" in the Stinkingwater district.[5]

Another printed version of the legend reads as follows:[6]

[5] By a curious double mistake, the Keeler Map of 1867, prepared for the Department of Indian Affairs, gives a "Colter's *Hill*" near the hot spring at the confluence of the Stinkingwater and the Big Horn.

A similar error occurs in the famous W. W. De Lacy Map of 1865, of the Territory of Montana, except that this time it is "Coulter's *Hall*." This map illustrates how vague was the knowledge of the region even at so late a date, for it shows a Sublette's Lake in the approximate true position of Jackson Lake to the south of Yellowstone Lake, but erroneously draining into the Missouri watershed. In addition De Lacy shows a Jackson Lake almost due west of Yellowstone Lake and separated from it by the Wind River Mountains, which of course are actually to the southeast of Yellowstone Lake.

As late as 1845 James Wyld, the famous English map maker, in his "Map of the United States and Relative Positions of the Oregon and Texas" shows a Snake River west of the Tetons, running into the Green River and thence into the Colorado and the Gulf of California.

[6] Strong, *A Trip to the Yellowstone National Park in* 1875, Washington, 1876, p. 27.

"For fifty or sixty years stories have been afloat among the hunters and trappers of the western territories of a wonderful and mysterious country lying somewhere on the Yellowstone River near its source, which the Indians never visited but shunned as the abode of evil spirits; where the rumble of earthquakes was heard day and night; where volcanoes were to be found emitting huge columns of boiling hot water; where sulphur and brimstone burst through the ground and flowed in great streams, forming lakes and rivers; where the mountains were rent asunder, creating chasms and canyons thousands of feet in depth; a country where the buffalo, elk and deer never were seen."

By this version the location of the Yellowstone wonders is correctly stated, and it will be noted "volcanoes emitting huge columns of boiling hot water," *i.e.,* geysers, have come into the legend. This suggests a later accretion to the story, added as more information about the region became general among the trappers.

In 1829 Joseph L. Meek stumbled upon the geyser basin, and forty years later Mrs. Victor set down his account in which he too refers to "Colter's Hell." An air of incredulity pervades Mrs. Victor's relation of Meek's statement, as though she considered she was telling another of that pioneer's yarns.[7]

Henry Inman, in discussing the Yellowstone

[7] *River of the West,* Hartford, 1870, pp. 75, 79.

country, said that Colter "was the first white man to see and describe the wonders of what is now the National Park. His account, however, was received as a frontier lie."[8]

In spite of the later ironic interpretation of the term, it is indeed possible that "Colter's Hell" was at its birth simply an expression coined in apt description of a region accepted as actually existing.

As the years went on others also visited the region. Some unknown man carved the initials "J. O. R." and the date "Aug. 19, 1819" on a tree. Bridger, the famous guide; Alvarez; Osborne Russell and other trappers penetrated to the district.[9]

The first expedition to visit the upper Yellowstone region for the purpose of serious exploration was that headed by David E. Folsom, who with C. W. Cook and William Peterson went in from the Montana side in 1869. Folsom was told that the Indians, taking counsel of their superstitious fears, believed the locality to be the abode of evil spirits and in their journeyings carefully avoided all near approach to it.[10]

After his return Folsom hesitated to report

[8] *Great Salt Lake Trail,* New York and London, 1898, p. 3.

[9] For an account of these early visitors see Chittenden, *Yellowstone Park,* Cincinnati, 1895, p. 40 *et seq.,* and Russell, *Journal of a Trapper,* Boise, 1921, p. 49.

[10] Langford, *Folsom-Cook Exploration,* and his *Discovery of Yellowstone in* 1870.

even to his intimates the marvels he had seen, but he finally told enough to stimulate others to visit the locality.[11] His printed account of the region appeared in the *Western Monthly* of Chicago in July, 1871.[12]

Actuated by Folsom's oral statements the Washburn-Doane Expedition made an exploration in 1870, and the next year the official Hayden Expedition was sent out by the Government. Meantime N. P. Langford, who had accompanied Washburn, began to give wide circulation to the facts by his articles and public lectures. But popular skepticism was still so stubborn in its resistance to this knowledge that Langford, too, as he himself states, was at first branded as a liar.[13]

It has heretofore commonly been stated that the first printed account of the geyser regions appeared in *The Wasp*, a Mormon paper of Nauvoo, Illinois, on August 13, 1842, and that it was by an unknown author.[14] But a much earlier account than that of *The Wasp* had been published. In

[11] Langford, *Vigilante Days and Ways*, New York and St. Paul, 1893, p. 377.

[12] It is this account that Langford reprinted. The preface, p. 6, quotes a version of the tradition of Colter's Hell, which was classed with Lilliput and Symmes Hole.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] The *Wasp* article was a reprint from the *Western Literary Messenger*, of Buffalo, of July 13, 1842, and was written by William Angus Ferris. Wagner, *The Plains and the Rockies*, 1921, p. 52, and Letter from Buffalo Historical Society, Nov. 19, 1925, to author.

Niles Register for October 6, 1827, appeared the following article reprinted from the *Philadelphia Gazette*:[15]

"From the West

Sweet Lake, July 8, 1827.

Shortly after writing to you last year I took my departure for the Black Foot country much against my will, but I could not make a party for any other route. We took a northerly direction about fifty miles, where we crossed Snake river, or the south fork of Columbia, at the forks of Henry's and Lewis's; at this place we were daily harassed by the Blackfeet; from thence we went up Henry's or north fork which bears north of east thirty miles and crossed a large rugged mountain which separates the two forks; from thence east up the other fork to its source, which heads on the top of the great chain of Rocky Mountains which separates the waters of the Atlantic from those of the Pacific. At or near this place heads the Luckkadee or California Sticking fork, Yellow Stone south fork of Maswri [Missouri] and Henry's fork, all those head at one angular point; that of the Yellow Stone has a large fresh water lake near its head on the very top of the mountain, which is about one hundred by forty miles in diameter, and as clear as crystal. On the south border of this lake is a number of

[15] Probably written by a member of Jedediah S. Smith's California Party, which was in that neighborhood at that time. Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

hot and boiling springs, some of water and others of most beautiful fine clay, resembling a mush pot, and throwing particles to the immense height of from twenty to thirty feet. The clay is of a white, and of a pink color, and the water appears fathomless, as it appears to be entirely hollow underneath. There is also a number of places where pure sulphur is sent forth in abundance. One of our men visited one of these whilst taking his recreation — there at an instant the earth began a tremendous trembling, and he with difficulty made his escape, when an explosion took place resembling that of thunder. During our stay in that quarter I heard it every day. From this place by a circuitous route to the north west we returned. Two others and myself pushed on in advance for the purpose of accumulating a few more beaver, and in the act of passing through a narrow confine in the mountain, we were met plump in the face by a large party of Blackfeet Indians, who not knowing our number fled into the mountain in confusion; we retired to a small grove of willows; here we made every preparation for battle — after which finding our enemy as much alarmed as ourselves we mounted our horses, which were heavily loaded, and took the back retreat. The Indians raised a tremendous yell, showered down from the mountain top, and almost cut off our retreat. We here put whip to our horses and they pursued us in close quarters until we reached the plains, when we left them be-

hind. On this trip one man was closely fired on by a party of Blackfeet; several others were closely pursued.

On this trip I lost one horse by accident, and the last spring two by the Utaws, who killed three for the purpose of eating them, one of which was a favorite buffaloe horse. This loss cannot be computed at less than four hundred and fifty dollars. A few days previous to my arrival at this place, a party of about 120 Blackfeet approached the camp and killed a Snake Indian and his squaw. The alarm was immediately given and the Snakes, Utaws and whites sallied forth for battle — the enemy fled to the mountain to a small concavity thickly grown with small timber surrounded by open ground. In this engagement the squaws were busily engaged in throwing up batteries and dragging off the dead. There were only six whites engaged in this battle, who immediately advanced within pistol shot and you may be assured that almost every shot counted one. The loss of the Snakes was three killed and the same number wounded; that of the whites, one wounded and two narrowly made their escape; that of the Utaws was none, though they gained great applause for their bravery. The loss of the enemy is not known—six were found dead on the ground; a great number besides were carried off on horses. Tomorrow I depart for the west."

Thus, in the manner here recounted, and with the slow passage of the years, John Colter's discovery of 1807 was verified and the actual existence of the strange spot first penetrated by him was finally accepted. The Yellowstone was known to the world.

On present-day maps of the region are two geographical features in commemoration of his journey. One of them is Colter Peak, near the southeastern point of Yellowstone Lake; the other is Coulter Creek, which empties into the Snake River above Jackson Lake. In addition the name Colter Falls has been given to one of the series of cataracts which make up the Great Falls of the Missouri.[16]

[16] Wheeler, *Trail of Lewis and Clark,* New York, 1904, p. 320.

CHAPTER IV

ADVENTURES AMONG THE BLACKFEET AND EXPERIENCES AS A TRAPPER IN THE MOUNTAINS

AFTER Colter's return to Manuel's Fort from his journey to the headwaters of the Yellowstone he spent the rest of the winter trapping and hunting about the region of the Big Horn. In the spring or early summer of 1808 occurred his first encounter with the Blackfeet. These Indians ranged generally north of the Yellowstone River, but their war parties often made forays upon the Crows and other tribes to the south and west. They were fierce and warlike, but during the earliest days of their contact with the whites, were not apparently particularly hostile to them.

The fight occurred while Colter was on an embassy whose purpose was the establishment of closer trading relations between the Indians and the Americans at Fort Manuel. He had met and was accompanying a considerable band of Flatheads, and had led them close to the Three Forks of the Missouri when a war party of Blackfeet fell upon them. Two years afterward, and while standing on the ground of the combat, Colter told

the incidents of the battle to James, who relates the story as follows:[1]

"The battle which had caused this terrible slaughter, took place in 1808, the year but one before, between the Blackfeet to the number of 1500 on the one side, and the Flatheads and Crows, making together about 800, on the other. Colter was in the battle on the side of the latter and was wounded in the leg, and thus disabled from standing. He crawled to a small thicket and there loaded and fired while sitting on the ground. The battle was desperately fought on both sides, but victory remained with the weaker party. The Blackfeet engaged at first about 500 Flatheads, whom they attacked in great fury. The noise, shouts and firing, brought a reinforcement of Crows to the Flatheads, who were fighting with great spirit, and defending the ground manfully. The Blackfeet, who are the Arabs of this region, were at length repulsed, but retired in perfect order, and could hardly be said to have been defeated. The Flatheads are a noble race of men, brave generous and hospitable. They might be called the Spartans of Oregon. Lewis and Clark had received much kindness from them in their expedition to the Columbia, which waters their country; and at the time of this well fought battle Colter was leading them to Manuel's Fort to trade with the Americans, when the Blackfeet fell upon them in such numbers as seemingly to

[1] James, *Three Years*, p. 52.

make their destruction certain. Their desperate courage saved them from a general massacre."

Colter, crippled as he was, managed to make his way back to the fort. Brackenridge says he went alone, though it is scarcely probable that some of the Indians he had helped did not assist him. It was Colter's participation in this battle that inspired the hostility of the Blackfeet to the whites. During its progress, and for the first time, they saw a white man fighting side by side with their enemies, but they did not know his presence was accidental and indicated no enmity to themselves.

In the summer or early autumn of this same year, and after he had recovered from his wound, Colter went again to the Three Forks. The journey was a trapping trip, and he was accompanied by John Potts, who also had been with Lewis and Clark. The date of the expedition is fixed as some time after July 7, 1808, for on that day Potts had entered into a contract with Lisa whereby he rented two horses, which, barring their death, were to be returned during the following December. Potts was to pay ten large beaver skins for their use, but in case the horses were stolen he was to pay sixty piastres each for them.[2]

It was during this expedition that Colter was

[2] Missouri Historical Society Collections, III, p. 256.

captured by the Blackfeet and made his marvellous escape from them, which exploit is thus related by James:[3]

"He had gone with a companion named Potts to the Jefferson river, which is the most western of the Three Forks, and runs near the base of the mountains. They were both proceeding up the river in search of beaver, each in his own canoe, when a war party of about eight hundred Blackfeet suddenly appeared on the East bank of the river. The Chiefs ordered them to come ashore, and apprehending robbery only, and knowing the utter hopelessness of flight, and having dropped his traps over the side of the canoe from the Indians into the water which was here quite shallow, he hastened to obey their mandate.

"On reaching the shore he was seized, disarmed and stripped entirely naked. Potts was still in his canoe in the middle of the stream, where he remained stationary, watching the result. Colter requested him to come ashore, which he refused to do, saying he might as well lose his life at once, as be stripped and robbed in the manner Colter had been. An Indian immediately fired and shot him about the hip; he dropped down in the canoe, but instantly rose with his rifle in his hands. 'Are you hurt?' said Colter. 'Yes,' said he, 'too much hurt to escape; if you can get away, do so. I will kill at least one of them.' He levelled his rifle and shot an Indian dead. In an instant at least a hun-

[3] James, *Three Years*, p. 57.

dred bullets pierced his body and as many savages rushed into the stream and pulled the canoe, containing the riddled corpse, ashore. They dragged the body up onto the bank, and with their hatchets and knives cut and hacked it all to pieces, and limb from limb. The entrails, heart, lungs &c they threw into Colter's face. The relations of the Indian were furious with rage and struggled, with tomahawk in hand, to reach Colter, while others held them back. He was every moment expecting the death blow or the fatal shot that should lay him beside his companion.

"A council was hastily held over him and his fate quickly determined upon. He expected to die by tomahawk, slow, lingering and horrible. But they had magnanimously determined to give him a chance, though a slight one, for his life.

"After the council, a Chief pointed to the prairie and motioned him away with his hand, saying, in the Crow language, 'Go,—go away.' He supposed they intended to shoot him as soon as he was out of the crowd and presented a fair mark to their guns. He started in a walk, and an old Indian with impatient signs and exclamations, told him to go faster, and as he still kept a walk the same Indian manifested his wishes with still more violent gestures and adjurations. When he had gone a distance of eighty or a hundred yards from the army of his enemies, he saw the younger Indians throwing off their blankets, leggings, and other incumbrances, as if for a race. Now he

knew their object. He was to run a race, of which the prize was to be his own life and scalp. Off he started with the speed of the wind. The war-whoop and yell immediately arose behind him; and looking back, he saw a large company of young warriors, with spears, in rapid pursuit. He ran with all the speed that nature, excited to the utmost, could give; fear and hope lent a supernatural vigor to his limbs and the rapidity of his flight astonished himself. The Madison Fork lay directly before him, five miles from his starting place. He had run half the distance when his strength began to fail and the blood to gush from his nostrils. At every leap the red stream spurted before him, and his limbs were growing rapidly weaker and weaker.

"He stopped and looked back; he had outstripped all his pursuers and could get off if strength would only hold out. One solitary Indian, far ahead of the others, was rapidly approaching, with a spear in his right hand and a blanket streaming from his left hand and shoulder. Despairing of escape, Colter awaited his pursuer and called to him in the Crow language, to save his life. The savage did not seem to hear him, but letting go his blanket, and seizing his spear with both hands, he rushed at Colter, naked and defenseless as he stood before him and made a desperate lunge to transfix him. Colter seized the spear near the head with his right hand, and exerting his whole strength, aided by the weight

of the falling Indian who had lost his balance in the fury of the onset, he broke off the iron head or blade which remained in his hand, while the savage fell to the ground and lay prostrate and disarmed before him. Now was his turn to beg for his life, which he did in the Crow language, and held up his hands imploringly, but Colter was not in a mood to remember the golden rule, and pinned his adversary through the body to the earth with one stab with the spear head. He quickly drew the weapon from the body of the now dying Indian, and seizing the blanket as lawful spoil, he again set out with renewed strength, feeling as he said to me, as if he had not run a mile.

"A shout and a yell arose from the pursuing army in his rear as from a legion of devils, and he saw the prairie behind him covered with Indians in full and rapid chase. Before him if anywhere, was life and safety; behind him certain death; and running as man never before sped the foot, except, perhaps, at the Olympic Games, he reached his goal, the Madison river and the end of his heat.

"Dashing through the willows on the bank, he plunged into the stream, and saw close beside him a beaver house, standing like a coal-pit about ten feet above the surface of the water, which was here of about the same depth. This presented to him a refuge from his ferocious enemies, of which he immediately availed himself. Diving under the

water, he arose into the beaver house, where he found a dry and comfortable resting place on the upper floor or story of this singular structure. The Indians soon came up, and in their search for him they stood upon the roof of his house of refuge, which he expected every moment to hear them breaking open. He also feared they would set it on fire. After a diligent search on that side of the river, they crossed over, and in about two hours returned again to his temporary habitation, in which he was enjoying bodily rest though with much anxious foreboding. The beaver houses are divided into two stories and will generally accommodate several men in a dry and comfortable lodging.

"In this asylum Colter kept fast till night. The cries of his terrible enemies had gradually died away, and all was still around him, when he ventured out of his hiding place, by the same opening under the water by which he entered and which admits the beavers to their building. He swam the river and hastened towards the mountain gap or ravine, about thirty miles above on the river, through which our company passed in the snow with so much difficulty. Fearing that the Indians might have guarded this pass, which was the only outlet from the valley, and to avoid the danger of a surprise, Colter ascended the almost perpendicular mountain before him, the tops and sides covered by perpetual snow. He clambered up this fearful ascent about four miles below the

gap, holding on by the rocks, shrubs, and branches of trees, and by morning had reached the top.

"He lay there concealed all that day, and at night proceeded in the descent of the mountain, which he accomplished by dawn. He now hastened out in the open plain towards Manuel's Fort on the Big Horn, about three hundred miles ahead in the North East. He travelled day and night, stopping only for necessary repose, and eating roots and the bark of trees, for eleven days. He reached the Fort, nearly exhausted by hunger, fatigue and excitement. His only clothing was the Indian's blanket whom he had killed in the race, and his only weapon the same Indian's spear which he brought to the Fort as a trophy. His beard was long, his face and whole body were thin and emaciated by hunger, and his limbs and feet swollen and sore. The company at the Fort did not recognize him in this dismal plight until he made himself known."

Such is the adventure. Fortunately there has come to us another recital of this wilderness classic by one who also received it from Colter's own lips. John Bradbury, who met him on his return from the Three Forks, tells it thus:[4]

"On the arrival of the party on the headwaters of the Missouri, Colter, observing that there appeared to be an abundance of beaver there, got permission to remain and hunt for some time,

[4] John Bradbury, *History of Travels in the Interior of America*, London, 1817; Vol. V of Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, p. 17.

which he did in company with a man named Dixon, who had traversed alone the immense tract of country from St. Louis to the headwaters of the Missouri. Soon after, he separated from Dixon and trapped in company with a hunter named Potts; and, aware of the hostility of the Blackfeet Indians, one of whom had been killed by Capt. Lewis, they set their traps at night and took them up early in the morning, remaining concealed during the day. They were examining their traps early one morning on a creek about six miles from that branch of the Missouri called Jefferson's Fork, and were ascending in a canoe, when they suddenly heard a great noise resembling the tramping of animals, but they could not ascertain the fact, as the high perpendicular banks on each side of the river impeded their view. Colter immediately pronounced it to be occasioned by Indians, and advised an instant retreat, but was accused of cowardice by Potts who insisted that the noise was caused by buffaloes, and they proceeded on. In few moments their doubts were removed by a party of five or six hundred Indians presenting themselves, and beckoning them to come ashore.

"As retreat was now impossible, Colter turned the head of his canoe to the shore, and, at the moment of its touching, an Indian seized the rifle belonging to Potts, but Colter immediately retook it and handed it to Potts who remained in the canoe, and, on receiving it, pushed off into the

river. He had scarcely quitted the shore when an arrow was shot at him and he cried out, 'Colter, I am wounded!' Colter remonstrated with him on the folly of attempting to escape, and urged him to come ashore. Instead of complying, he instantly leveled his rifle at an Indian, and shot him dead on the spot. This conduct may appear to be an act of madness; but it was doubtless the effect of sudden and sound reasoning, for, if taken alive, he must have expected to be tortured to death, according to their custom. He was instantly pierced with arrows so numerous that, to use the language of Colter, 'he was made a riddle of.'

"They now seized Colter, stripped him entirely naked, and began to consult on the manner in which he should be put to death. They were first inclined to set him up as a mark to shoot at, but the chief interfered, and, seizing him by the shoulder, asked him if he could run fast. Colter, who had been some time among the Keekatsa or Crow Indians, had in a considerable degree acquired the Blackfeet language and was well acquainted with Indian customs. He knew that he now had to run for his life, with the dreadful odds of five hundred or six hundred against him — those, armed Indians. Therefore he cunningly replied that he was a bad runner, although he was considered by the hunters as remarkably swift. The chief now commanded the party to remain stationary, and led Colter out upon the prairie three

or four hundred yards and released him, bidding him to save himself if he could. At that instant the horrid war-whoop sounded in the ears of poor Colter, who, urged by hope ran at a speed which surprised himself.

"He proceeded toward the Jefferson Fork, having to cross a plain over six miles in width, abounding with the prickly pear, on which he was every instant treading with his naked feet. He ran nearly half way across the plain before he ventured to look over his shoulder, when he perceived that the Indians were very much scattered and that he had gained ground to a considerable distance from the main body; but one Indian who carried a spear was much before all the rest, and not more than a hundred yards from him. A faint gleam of hope now cheered the heart of Colter. He derived confidence from the belief that escape was within the bounds of possibility; but that confidence was nearly proving fatal to him, for he exerted himself to such a degree that blood gushed from his nostrils and soon almost covered the fore part of his body. He had now arrived within a mile of the river, when he distinctly heard the appalling sound of footsteps behind him, and every instant expected to feel the spear of his pursuer. Again he turned his head and saw the savage not twenty yards from him. Determined, if possible, to avoid the expected blow, he suddenly stopped, turned round, and spread out his arms. The Indian, surprised at

this sudden action, and perhaps at the bloody appearance of Colter, also attempted to stop; but, exhausted with running, he fell while endeavoring to throw his spear, which stuck in the ground and broke in his hand. Colter instantly snatched up the pointed part, with which he pinned him to the earth, and continued his flight.

"The foremost of the Indians, on arriving at the place, stopped till the others came up to join him, when they set up a hideous yell. Every moment of this time was improved by Colter, who, though fainting and exhausted, succeeded in gaining the skirting of the cottonwood trees on the borders of the Fork, through which he ran and plunged into the river. Fortunately for him, a little below this place was an island, against the upper point of which a raft of drift timber had lodged. He dived under the raft and after several efforts got his head above water among the trunks of the trees, covered over with smaller wood to the depth of several feet. Scarcely had he secured himself when the Indians arrived on the river, screeching and yelling, as Colter expressed it, 'like so many devils.'

"They were frequently on the raft during the day, and were seen through the chinks by Colter, who was congratulating himself upon his escape until the idea arose that they might set the raft on fire. In horrible suspense he remained until night, when, hearing no more of the Indians, he dived from under the raft, swam silently down

the river a long distance when he landed and traveled all night. Although happy in having escaped from the Indians, his situation was still dreadful. He was completely naked under a burning sun. The soles of his feet were entirely filled with the thorns of the prickly pears. He was hungry and had no means of killing game, although he saw abundance around him, and was at least seven days from Lisa's Fort on the Big Horn branch of the Roche Juan river. Those were circumstances under which any man but an American hunter would have despaired. He arrived at the Fort in seven days, having subsisted upon a root must esteemed by the Indians of the Missouri, now known by naturalists as the *Psoralea esculenta.*"[5]

These accounts of the escape differ somewhat, that of Bradbury being probably the more accurate. James's reference to the possession of firearms by a hundred Indians is doubtless an anachronism. The contact of the Blackfeet with the whites had as yet been extremely limited and accordingly they could hardly have been so

[5] The story of this escape was current in frontier literature for many years. An early popular account, taken from Bradbury, appears in *Indian Anecdotes and Barbarities,* printed in Palmer, Massachusetts, about 1830, "for M. Baldwin, the blind man." It is from this rare tract that the frontispiece of this volume is reproduced. Other examples of the popularization of the account are in Solomon Bell [W. J. Snelling], *Tales of Travels West of the Mississippi,* Boston, 1830, p. 104, and in Triplett, *Conquering the Wilderness,* N. Y. and St. Louis, 1883, p. 396.

armed. James wrote his account in 1846 and evidently imputed to the Indians of 1808 the conditions which obtained at the later time.[6] Regarding the beaver house, he may have put that in as a picturesque touch. James was sometimes given to exaggeration, as his diatribes against many of the men he met during his adventures bear witness.

As James tells us, when winter came on and Colter had somewhat recouped his strength, the loss of his traps preyed upon his mind. So he decided to make another trip to the Three Forks and to recover those he had craftily dropped overboard when surprised by the Blackfeet. He reasoned that the trails would be rendered virtually impassable for the Indians during the period of deep snow; that they would accordingly keep close to their villages; and that he could travel unmolested. Thereupon this indomitable man set out alone on a journey three hundred miles each way.

Colter finally reached and passed the Gallatin, the easternmost of the Three Forks, and was at last within easy distance of the place where the

[6] The *Louisiana Gazette,* July 26, 1810, said that one of the causes of the hostility of the Blackfeet was that they were envious of the Crows with whom the Americans were trading, particularly because the Blackfeet were so far from the Hudson's Bay factory that they could not obtain arms.

traps were sunk. Being in no haste he camped for the night on the bank of the river, and kindled a fire to cook his meal of buffalo meat. Suddenly he heard the crackling of branches behind him towards the river, and the click of the cocking of guns. Instantly, and with one mighty leap, he jumped across his fire into the night beyond as several shots struck the spot where he had been resting. Then he fled for his life and again in the darkness scaled the same cliff, fearing as before the blocking of the pass.[7] He returned with all speed to the Fort, and — history being silent on the point — it is a fair conclusion that he did not go back a second time for his traps. Once more, however, did he return to the same locality, and once more did he have cause to regret it.

From the time of his failure to regain his traps until the next spring Colter led the ordinary life of the mountain hunter, with no further unusual adventures. But with the arrival of the Lisa party of 1809 another period of intense activity and danger began, which finally resulted in his permanent retirement from the Wilderness.

Early in 1809 Lisa had formed a new organization called the Missouri Fur Company, and again went up the river with a numerous force, includ-

[7] James, *Three Years*, p. 64.

ing Thomas James.[8] Lisa also had with him that same Mandan chief named Shehaka, or Big White, who had started down the Missouri for a visit to Washington on the same day that Colter had received his discharge from Lewis and Clark. In 1807 Lieutenant Nathaniel Pryor, the former Sergeant Pryor of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with forty soldiers, had attempted to escort Shehaka back to his village. But Pryor's party was intercepted by the Arikaras, and with a loss of ten or twelve killed was turned back to St. Louis.[9] There the chief remained until Lisa's fur company took him and his wife home under a con-

[8] James, *Three Years,* p. 18. On March 29, 1809, Thomas James of Monroe County, Ill., enlisted with the fur company which included Pierre Chouteau, and other prominent St. Louis traders. He must have been one of those unfortunate persons born with a chip on each shoulder. At any rate he was in hot water from the start, and when he published his reminiscences in 1846, the book contained so many scandalous accusations against persons who had meantime become the aristocracy of St. Louis, that it was quickly suppressed. According to his version he was robbed and cheated at every turn. James pays his respects to Lisa as follows: "Rascality sat in every feature of his dark complexioned, Mexican face — gleamed from his black, Spanish eyes, and seemed enthroned in a forehead 'villainous low.'" *Three Years,* p. 97. When he reached St. Louis in August, 1810, James sued the fur company and was in turn sued by it. He "compromised" the claim by giving his note to the company for One Hundred Dollars. He later made a trip into the Southwest, then fought in the Black Hawk War, and finally rose to be a general in the Illinois militia.

[9] For an account of Pryor, see Coues, *Journal of Jacob Fowler,* p. 5. Pryor's Fork, the starting point of Colter's "Route" was named after him by Lewis and Clark, Thwaites, *Journals,* V, p. 326.

tract with the government.[10] The unfortunate chief had little or no influence with the tribe after his return, for his description of the power and resources of the white man overtaxed the credulity of his fellows. As in Colter's case his story was too fantastic for immediate popular acceptance.[11]

Lisa's expedition of 1809 was confronted by difficulties from the day of its start. Many of the *engagés* deserted, and others threatened to kill Lisa, who disarmed some of the troublemakers. Among these was James, who was accordingly almost a prisoner. Under such circumstances the trappers arrived at the Grosventre village, where they met Colter, who was hunting in the neighborhood.

James, in speaking of his first meeting with Colter, says:[12]

[10] A narrative by David H. Coyner, *The Lost Trappers,* purports to tell how one Ezekiel Williams and twenty men in 1807 escorted Shehaka to the Mandan villages, and how all but three were slain on the return. It is an exciting tale, but if the rest of it is no more authentic than the account of Shehaka's trip, its historical value is slight.

[11] Brackenridge in his *Journal,* 1st ed., p. 261, quotes another chief as saying in reference to Shehaka: "Does that bag of lies pretend to have any authority here?"

In the second ed. of the *Journal,* Baltimore, 1816, p. 178, he says: Shehaka and his wife "have since fallen into disrepute from the extravagant tales they related as to what they had witnessed; for the Mandans treated with ridicule the idea of there being a greater or more numerous people than themselves."

[12] James, *Three Years,* p. 35. This village on the Missouri was about 15 miles above the Mandan villages, and was accordingly about 75 miles above the present Bismarck, South Dakota.

"Of him I purchased a set of Beaver traps[13] for $120, a pound and a half of powder for $6. and a gun for $40. Seeing me thus equipped, Lisa, the most active, the meanest and the most rascally of the whole, offered me new and good traps, a gun, and ammunition. I told him he appeared willing enough to help when help was not needed and after I was provided at my expense."

This incident proves Colter to have been one of that high caste in the Far West known as "free trappers," for otherwise he would not have been allowed to deal with James. The ordinary employees of a fur company worked for wages; were completely controlled by its orders; and were subject to service as boatmen and camp-tenders. The free trappers were usually attached to a particular company, but owed only a loose allegiance to it. They chose the time and place for their trapping, and generally owned their outfits. Their catch belonged to themselves, but they were expected to sell or trade their pelts to the post which had nominal authority in the region, or which had advanced supplies to them. Sometimes, as in the case of Colter, Dickson and Hancock on the Yellowstone in 1806, there was no connection with any company. While the virtual independence of the free trappers sometimes caused trouble to the *bourgeois,* their tested bravery and

[13] This makes it obvious that Colter, at the first opportunity, had not only replaced his lost traps but had made doubly sure by acquiring an ample surplus.

fighting qualities frequently made them a welcome addition to a fur brigade operating among hostile tribes.

At the Grosventre village the 1809 party built a fort, named Fort Lisa, and nearly all its members went into winter quarters there. James and two other malcontents, however, made canoes and started at once for the Three Forks. They were soon stopped by the freezing of the river, and built a cabin a few miles above the fort. James's companions then started back for ammunition. They were never heard of again. In February of 1810 three of Lisa's brigade by chance found the cabin and its solitary occupant, and took James with them to Manuel's Fort at the mouth of the Big Horn, which they reached after fifteen days of terrible hardship from cold and hunger.[14]

About the 1st of March, 1810, thirty-two men under command of Colonel Pierre Menard and Andrew Henry, and including James, started overland from Fort Manuel to the Three Forks. Colter acted as guide. After twelve days of travel they reached the divide between the Yellowstone and the Gallatin Rivers, and entered a pass in the mountains.[15]

There they soon encountered snow so deep as to make movement slow, and at times almost impossible. In places the drifts were fifty and sixty feet deep. One day they made only four miles.

[14] James, *Three Years*, p. 39.
[15] *Id.*, p. 49.

That night they reached the Gallatin River. James and three companions left the main body, forded the stream at that spot, and proceeded along its south bank. Colter, meantime, had discovered an opening through the mountain bordering the river on the north side, and the remainder of the party continued down the river with him. For four days the two divisions were separated, and all the members of both sections endured great suffering, especially from snow-blindness.

James, in describing the reunion of the party, says: "They, like ourselves, had all been blind, and had suffered more severely than we from the same causes. They had killed three dogs, one of them a present to me from an Indian, and two horses, to appease the demands of hunger, before they had sufficiently recovered to take sight on their guns.[16] While in this distressed situation, enveloped by thick darkness at midday, thirty Snake Indians came among them and left without committing any depredation. Brown and another who suffered less than the others, saw and counted these Indians, who might have killed them all and escaped with their effects with impunity. Their preservation was wonderful.[17]

[16] The killing of a horse for food was always the proof of desperate hunger among the trappers and mountain men, for it meant a serious limitation of transport, and therefore was often the forerunner of abandonment of packs of furs or other valuables.

[17] It is possible the savages were mystified by the strange spectacle of these men groping about at mid-day as though it were night, and considered it "bad medicine" to molest them.

When we overtook them they were slowly recovering from blindness, and we all encamped together with thankful and joyous hearts for our late and narrow escape from painful and lingering death. We proceeded on in better spirits. On the next day we passed a battle-field of the Indians, where the skulls and bones were lying around on the ground in vast numbers. The battle which caused this vast slaughter took place in 1808, the year but one before."[18]

Colter had been a participant in the fight here mentioned, as has heretofore been related, and it was on this occasion that he gave to James the details of it.

Through Colter's guidance the party finally reached the Three Forks on April 3, 1810, and Colonel Menard at once began the erection of a fort.[19]

It was at this spot that Colter had made his famous run from the Indians in the autumn of 1808, and here in the very theater that had witnessed the scene Colter stood with James and recounted the adventure. James expressed wonder that even a mountain goat could scale the rugged and perpendicular mountain side up which Colter had clambered. He felt, he says, a premonition of peril.

As usual, James was not amenable to discipline, so he with three companions left the rest

[18] James, *Three Years*, p. 52.
[19] *Id.*, p. 66.

of the party and went down the Missouri a short distance in canoes. Colter and seventeen men of the main body went up the Jefferson to set their beaver traps, and the others (ten or a dozen in number) remained to complete the fort. James's little group at first saw wealth ahead as a result of the enormous catches they made, but they soon lost a canoe on the rocks. With it went most of their pelts and ammunition, and all their hopes, forcing two of them to return to Menard's Fort for fresh supplies.

Meantime calamity had overtaken Colter and the rest of the group on the Jefferson. On April 12, 1810, while nearly all the members of that party were scattered and tending their traps, the Blackfeet attacked and killed a hunter named Cheek and four men who were acting as camp-tenders.[20] All the others fled for the fort and the survivors had many narrow escapes, but all of them managed to reach the fort within a day or two, Colter among the first. The men were all badly frightened except Colter, who, as James says, "with his large experience, naturally looked upon the whole as an ordinary occurrence."[21] For several days the entire party stood guard, momentarily expecting another attack by the savages.

Colter was wise enough in his estimate of pre-

[20] Interview with Pierre Menard in *Louisiana Gazette,* July 26, 1810.

[21] James, *Three Years,* p. 72.

vailing conditions to realize that the Lisa expedition was a failure, and that it was only a question of time before the incessant attacks of the Indians would completely wreck the enterprise. He saw it might soon be impossible for the survivors to get through their encircling enemies, who already lay in wait for every straggler from camp.

On the occasion when he had gone back for his traps, he had, according to James,[22] "promised God Almighty that he would never return to this region again if he were only permitted to escape once more with his life. He did escape once more, and was now again in the same country, courting the same dangers which he had so often braved, and that seemed to have for him a sort of fascination. Such men, and there are thousands of such, can only live in a state of excitement and constant action. Perils and dangers are their natural element, and their familiarity with them and indifference to them, are well illustrated in these adventures of Colter. A few days afterward when Cheek was killed and Colter had another narrow escape he came into the fort and said he had promised his Maker to leave the country, and 'Now,' said he, throwing down his hat on the ground, 'if God will only forgive me this time and let me off, I will leave the country day after tomorrow — and be D—d if I ever come into it again.'"

[22] Bradbury, *Travels*, p. 65.

Colter this time was as good as his word, and left the Far West accordingly, and forever. With him went a man whose name is unknown and another named William Bryan, who bore a letter from Colonel Menard to Pierre Chouteau.[23] The three travelled overland and were attacked by the watchful Blackfeet, but managed to elude the Indians by taking cover in a thicket. After that attack they ventured to move only at night until they reached the Big Horn, and safety.[24] From that point they proceeded to Manuel's Fort, and thence hurried down the Missouri to St. Louis by canoe, making the trip in thirty days and arriving at the end of this record voyage in May of 1810. It was on his arrival that Bradbury, who was destined to accompany the relief expedition that Lisa took up the river the following year, met Colter.[25]

Meanwhile the remainder of the party were facing further disaster. Early in May Colter's old companion, Drouillard, with a reckless disregard of danger, went too far from the camp, and

[23] This letter was dated Three Forks of the Missouri, April 21, 1810. Translated from the French it reads in part, "A party of our hunters was defeated by the Blackfeet on the 12th instant. There were two men killed, all their beaver stolen, many of their traps lost and the ammunition of several of them, and also seven of our horses. . . . This unfortunate affair has quite discouraged our hunters, who are unwilling to hunt any more here." The letter continued that three others were missing and undoubtedly killed, but that an effort would be made to carry on the enterprise. Chittenden, *Amer. Fur Trade,* III, p. 893.

[24] James, *Three Years,* p. 65.

[25] Bradbury, *Travels,* p. 17.

he and two other trappers (Delaware Indians) were killed.[26] Vicious and deadly attacks continued until at last it was realized that the fort was untenable. Most of the survivors made their way back to Manuel's Fort;[27] although Henry and a few others turned their steps toward the west and wintered in the mountains, in quarters constructed on Henry's Fork of the Snake River and known as Henry's Fort. From that refuge the survivors returned during the following year.[28]

[26] Interview with Pierre Menard, *Louisiana Gazette,* July 26, 1810.

[27] James, *Three Years,* p. 86.

[28] *Id.,* p. 83, note. Irving, *Astoria,* I, pp. 148, 187.

CHAPTER V

COLTER'S LAST DAYS

UPON his final return to St. Louis in May of 1810, after six years in the Wilderness, Colter settled at Charette, a village in Franklin County, Missouri, a few miles above the mouth of the Missouri River and near the present town of Dundee.

Here as a farmer he spent the scant remainder of his days, of which little is known. He must, however, have chafed at civilized life after the long freedom of the mountains. A part of this period was occupied by litigation against the estate of Meriwether Lewis, and also against Thomas James on a note given by the latter for the arms and traps bought from Colter.[1]

Some time after his return Colter married. The maiden name of his wife we do not know, but her given name was Sally.[2]

By an Act of Congress approved by President Jefferson on March 3, 1807, and entitled "An Act making compensation to Messrs. Lewis and Clark and their companions," the Secretary of War was directed to issue land warrants to both Lewis and Clark for one thousand six hundred

[1] James, *Three Years*, p. 93.
[2] *Id.*, p. 278.

acres each; and to certain others, including Colter by name, similar warrants for three hundred and twenty acres each.[3]

In the meantime Lisa's establishment on the upper Missouri had met with disaster from fire as well as from the hostility of the Indians, and the remnant of the men under Henry who had crossed the Rockies had not been heard from. To retrieve his falling fortunes, and also to rescue his associates, Lisa organized an expedition that started from St. Charles on the Missouri, above St. Louis, on April 2, 1811.[4] Brackenridge accompanied the party which travelled by bateaux. During the preceding month of March Wilson P. Hunt, representing John Jacob Astor, had also departed from St. Louis with an expedition which was to travel across the continent to the mouth of the Columbia and there meet the section of the fur company that had left by sea on the "Tonquin" in the previous September. With Hunt was John Bradbury. Lisa was not popular with the other traders, although Brackenridge gives him a high character, and was not wanted by the Hunt party as a companion on the trip. In

[3] Vincennes, Indiana, *Sun,* August 15, 1810.

Warrant No. 9 was issued under this act in favor of John Colter, and was surrendered in payment of land entered in the U. S. Land Office at Franklin, Missouri, in 1824, by John G. Comegys, assignee of the warrant; so it was not this land on which Colter lived. Records of General Land Office, Washington.

[4] Brackenridge, *Journal,* p. 199.

consequence a race up the river ensued. By desperate efforts Lisa's party caught up with Hunt's on June 2, and thereafter the two went on together, though not very amicably. Brackenridge was well pleased, however, for it enabled him to renew his friendship with Bradbury, and likewise to form the acquaintance of Thomas Nuttall, another naturalist who accompanied Hunt. Nuttall was a source of endless wonder to the Canadian *voyageurs* who propelled Hunt's bateaux. He had a habit of leaping out of his boat, uprooting some plant strange to him, and raptly gazing at it, altogether oblivious of danger from lurking Indians. He was appraised as quite harmless, though the work entailed to find him and shepherd him back into camp every day was considered a great nuisance.[5]

Bradbury, just after the start and writing at Charette on March 17 of 1811, says:[6]

"I enquired of Sullens for John Colter, one of Lewis & Clark's party, whom General Clark had mentioned to me as being able to point out the place on the Missouri where the petrified skeleton of a fish above forty feet long had been found.[7]

[5] On one occasion several hundred Indians dashed out to the boats, and the travellers momentarily expected hostilities, which, however, did not follow. Meanwhile Nuttall studied the savages attentively, oblivious of the preparations for defense, and remarked to one of the party, "Sir, don't you think these Indians much fatter and more robust than those of yesterday." Brackenridge, *Journal,* p. 241.

[6] Bradbury, *Travels,* p. 17.

[7] See note p. 67.

Sullens informed me that Colter lived about a mile from us, and sent his son to inform him of our arrival; but we did not see him that evening."

On the 18th Bradbury continued:

"At daybreak Sullens came to our camp and informed us that Colter would be with us in a few minutes. Shortly after, he arrived and accompanied us for some miles, but could not give me the information I wished for. He seemed to have a great inclination to accompany the expedition but having been lately married he reluctantly took leave of us."

Irving in his *Astoria* records that the Hunt party on successive days encountered Daniel Boone and John Colter.[8] Of these memorable meetings he says:

"On the after noon of the third day, Jan. 17th, [March 17, 1811] the boats touched at Charette, one of the old villages founded by the original French colonists. Here they met with Daniel Boon, the renowned patriarch of Kentucky, who had kept in the advance of civilization and on the borders of the wilderness, still leading a hunter's life, though now in his eighty-fifth year. He had but recently returned from a hunting and trapping expedition, and brought over sixty beaver skins as trophies of his skill. The old man was still erect in form, strong in limb, and unflinching in spirit; and as he stood on the river bank, watching the departure of the expedition destined to

[8] *Astoria,* New York, 1836, p. 154.

traverse the Wilderness to the very shores of the Pacific, very likely felt a thrill of the old pioneer spirit, impelling him to shoulder his rifle and join the adventurous band. Boon flourished several years after this meeting, in a vigorous old age, the Nestor of hunters and backwoodmen; and died full of sylvan honors and renown, in 1818, in his ninety-second year.[9]

"The next morning early, as the party were yet encamped at the mouth of a small stream, they were visited by another of those heroes of the wilderness, one John Colter, who had accompanied Lewis and Clarke in their memorable expedition. He had recently made one of those vast internal voyages so characteristic of this fearless class of men, and of the immense regions over which they hold their lonely wanderings; having come from the head waters of the Missouri to St. Louis in a small canoe. This distance of three thousand miles he had accomplished in thirty days. Colter kept with the party all morning. He had many particulars to give them concerning the Blackfeet Indians, a restless and predatory tribe, who had conceived an implacable hostility to the white men, in consequence of one of their warriors having been killed by Capt. Lewis, while attempting to steal horses. Through the country infested by

[9] It was in the Boone blood to keep to the far frontier. Daniel M. Boone, a son of the famous old Kentuckian, went to Kansas in 1827, and there on August 22, 1828, was born Napoleon Boone, the first white child in Kansas. Wilder, *Annals of Kansas,* 1886, p. 27.

these savages the expedition would have to proceed, and Colter was urgent in reiterating the precautions that ought to be observed respecting them. He had himself experienced their vindictive cruelty, and his story deserves particular citation as showing the hairbreadth adventures to which these solitary rovers of the wilderness are exposed."

After quoting Bradbury's account of Colter's escape Irving continues:

"Such is a sample of the rugged experience which Colter had to relate of savage life; yet, with all these perils and terrors fresh in his recollection, he could not see the present band on their way to those regions of danger and adventure, without feeling a vehement impulse to join them. A Western trapper is like a sailor; past hazards only stimulate him to further risks. The vast prairie is to one what the ocean is to the other, a boundless field of enterprise and exploit. However he may have suffered in his last cruise, he is always ready to join a new expedition; and the more adventurous its nature, the more attractive it is to his vagrant spirit.

"Nothing seems to have kept Colter from continuing with the party to the shores of the Pacific but the circumstance of his having recently married. All the morning he kept with them, balancing in his mind the charms of his bride against those of the Rocky Mountains; the former, however, prevailed, and after a march of several miles,

he took a reluctant leave of the travellers and turned his face homeward."

This is the last view we have of Colter. He died of jaundice[10] in November of 1813.[11] In the *Missouri Gazette* of December 11, 1813, appeared the legal notice of administration of his estate. The inventory gave the value of his property as $229.41.[12]

So ended the career of John Colter. Perhaps soon — perhaps never — some long hidden manuscript will come to light which will further lift the veil and reveal the full stature of a man who was a great outstanding figure in the realm of pioneer achievement, and whose place in history is with the heroic pathfinders.

[10] James, *Three Years,* p. 58.

[11] A grave, supposed to be that of Colter, has recently been discovered at Tunnel Hill, near Dundee, Missouri.

[12] Chittenden, *American Fur Trade,* III, p. 723.

UPB

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